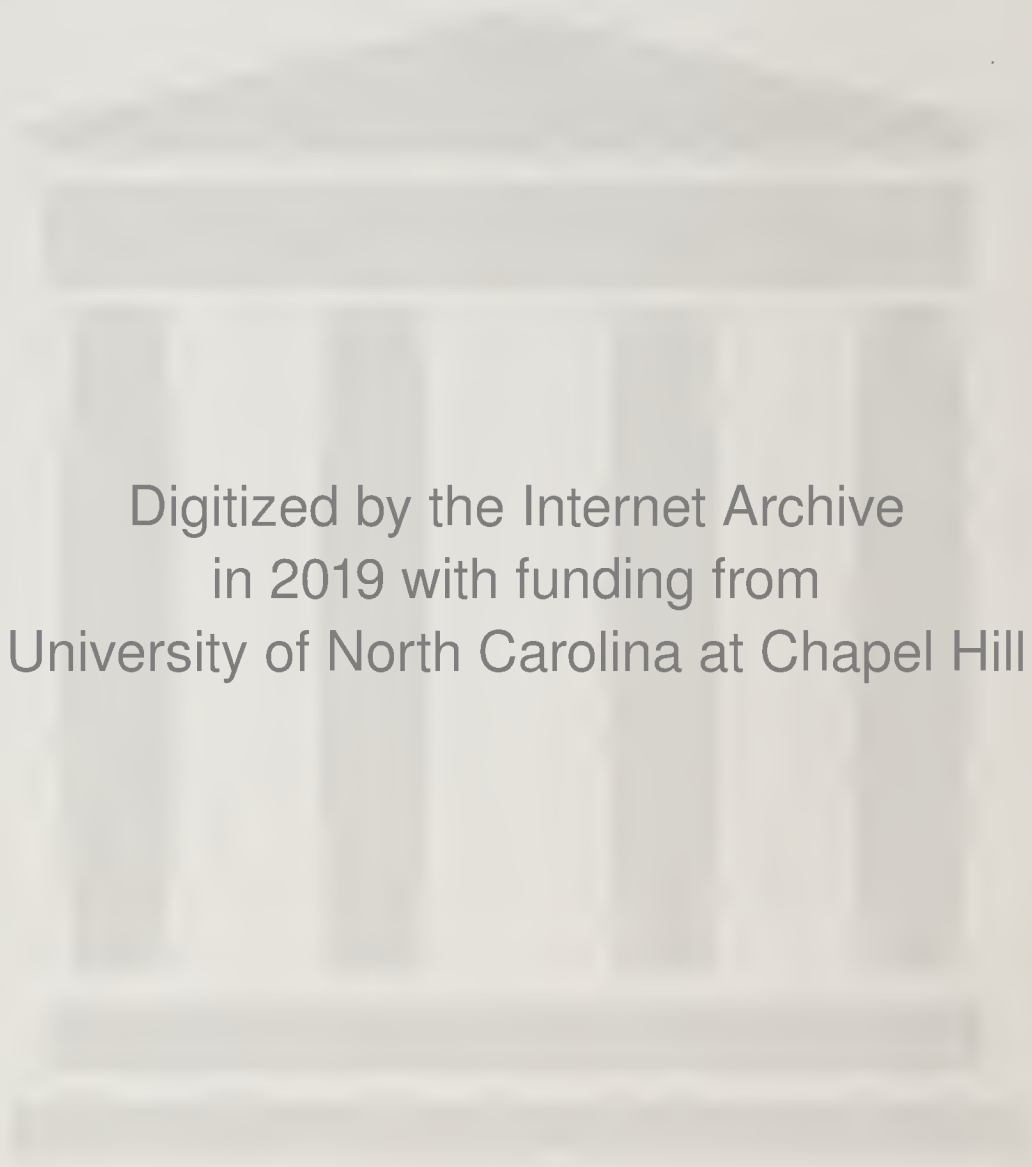


# THE HOUSE OF THE FOXES

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KATHARINE TYNAN





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# THE HOUSE OF THE FOXES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE  
 SHAMROCKS  
 BALLADS AND LYRICS  
 A NUN: HER FRIENDS AND  
 HER ORDER  
 CUCKOO SONGS  
 A CLUSTER OF NUTS  
 THE LAND OF MIST AND  
 MOUNTAIN  
 AN ISLE IN THE WATER  
 THE WAY OF A MAID  
 MIRACLE PLAYS  
 OH ! WHAT A PLAGUE IS  
 LOVE  
 A LOVER'S BREAST KNOT  
 THE HANDSOME BRANDONS  
 THE WIND IN THE TREES  
 (POEMS)  
 THE DEAR IRISH GIRL  
 SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY  
 THREE FAIR MAIDS  
 A DAUGHTER OF THE  
 FIELDS  
 A UNION OF HEARTS  
 A GIRL OF GALWAY  
 COLLECTED POEMS  
 THAT SWEET ENEMY  
 THE HANDSOME QUAKER  
 A KING'S WOMAN  
 LOVE OF SISTERS  
 A RED RED ROSE  
 THE HONOURABLE MOLLY  
 THE FRENCH WIFE  
 JUDY'S LOVERS  
 JULIA  
 THE LUCK OF THE FAIR-  
 FAXES  
 A DAUGHTER OF KINGS  
 A FAVOURITE OF FORTUNE  
 DICK PENTREATH  
 INNOCENCIES  
 A YELLOW DOMINO  
 THE ADVENTURES OF  
 ALICIA  
 THE STORY OF BAWN

A BOOK OF MEMORIES  
 FOR MAISIE  
 HER LADYSHIP  
 MARY GRAY  
 THE LOST ANGEL  
 THE HOUSE OF THE  
 CRICKETS  
 EXPERIENCES  
 PEGGY THE DAUGHTER  
 COUSINS AND OTHERS  
 LAUDS  
 KITTY AUBREY  
 HER MOTHER'S DAUGHTER  
 BETTY CAREW  
 FREDA  
 THE HOUSE OF THE SECRET  
 THE STORY OF CECILIA  
 NEW POEMS  
 THE STORY OF CLARICE  
 PRINCESS KATHARINE  
 ROSE OF THE GARDEN  
 HEART O' GOLD  
 HONEY, MY HONEY  
 MRS. PRATT OF PARADISE  
 FARM  
 TWENTY-FIVE YEARS  
 THE DAUGHTER OF THE  
 MANOR  
 IRISH POEMS  
 JOHN BULTEEL'S  
 DAUGHTERS  
 A MIDSUMMER ROSE  
 MOLLY, MY HEART'S  
 DELIGHT  
 A SHAMEFUL INHERI-  
 TANCE  
 LOVERS' MEETINGS  
 (*With Frances Maitland*)  
 THE BOOK OF FLOWERS  
 (*Edited*)  
 CABINET OF IRISH LITERA-  
 TURE  
 IRISH LOVE SONGS



# THE HOUSE OF THE FOXES

BY

KATHARINE TYNAN

AUTHOR OF "MOLLY, MY HEART'S DELIGHT," "JOHN BULTEEL'S DAUGHTERS"  
"A MIDSUMMER ROSE," "MRS. PRATT OF PARADISE FARM," ETC., ETC.

LONDON

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1915

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# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE DOOM . . . . .	I
II. THE FOXES . . . . .	14
III. THE HOUSE OF FOXES . . . . .	27
IV. "IT WOULDN'T BE THE FOXES" . . . . .	39
V. THE TOWER . . . . .	52
VI. THE DOVE . . . . .	66
VII. THE MORNING AFTER . . . . .	79
VIII. THE PORTRAIT . . . . .	92
IX. EXORCISM . . . . .	104
X. THE RETURN . . . . .	117
XI. THE TRUCE . . . . .	129
XII. THE DAWN . . . . .	141
XIII. BIDDY PENDERGAST'S COTTAGE . . . . .	154
XIV. THE GAME OF CHESS . . . . .	165
XV. "LOVE THAT HATH US IN HIS NET" . . . . .	176
XVI. A KISS . . . . .	189
XVII. THE OTHER WOMAN . . . . .	200

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII. THE GOLDEN YOUTH . . . . .	213
XIX. THE NURSE-CHILD . . . . .	225
XX. THE POISONED HOUSE . . . . .	238
XXI. THE WRONG MAN . . . . .	252
XXII. THE WIDOW . . . . .	264
XXIII. THE MESSENGER FLIES AWAY . . . . .	274
XXIV. THE END OF THE PASSAGE . . . . .	285
XXV. THE LAST OF THE DOOM . . . . .	296



# THE HOUSE OF THE FOXES

## CHAPTER I

### THE DOOM

SHEER love of her own country and a persistent craving for her own people had drawn Meg Hildebrand back to Ireland from Austria, where she had lived in a luxurious state as English governess and companion to the daughters of the Archduchess Magda.

She had loved the gracious lady, and the beautiful girls who were a delight to the eye and had all the consideration for a lady in a dependent position that one might have expected from their breeding.

It hurt her to go : but she had to go. Her heart turned from the gay court, where she was treated with a deference which almost hurt her, to the bare bogs, the wild mountains, the clouds, the soft airs of her own country. Her longing for home positively began to injure her health. When that fact was represented to the Archduchess by Dr. Buchheim,

the Court physician, she withdrew her opposition to Miss Hildebrand's departure, on condition that Meg's sister, Pauline, took her place. She hastened her going. Meg left the Schloss loaded with gifts, covered with caresses. Not soon would she forget the gracious Archduchess, amid her flock of lovely girls. They remained in her mind like a group of the Graces, like houris, better, like angels, as she sped across Europe in the *train de luxe* by which the Archduchess had sent her home.

There was not much luxury at Crane's Nest, the out-at-elbows house where Terence Hildebrand did his best to keep a roof over his large, healthy family. The roof had a way of flying off in stormy nights when the west wind carried portions of it clattering away over the rocks into the Atlantic. As the repairs were of the cobbling order, it followed that the upper floor of Crane's Nest was damp and uninhabitable. But there was plenty of room without it in the big square mansion with double wings, perched high on its hill-side, where it seemed to catch all the winds and every ray of sun. The sunsets were splendid from the windows of Crane's Nest. So was the jewelled sky at night. From many windows you caught a glimpse of the distant lakes.

"You'll not be leaving us again, Meg?" said Terence Hildebrand, when he had detached his

eldest daughter from the uproarious welcomes of her young brothers and sisters who clung about her as though they could never be tired of admiring and caressing her. "You'll not leave us again? There's plenty of room at Crane's Nest for all my children, glory be to goodness. Now that Terry can go up to Trinity, thanks to you, and that we can put Agatha and Kathie to school, we'll be missing them, with Pauline away too, so you'll have to stay with us."

Meg said nothing at the moment. She would not talk of going away when she had hardly arrived : but, after Terry and Agatha and Katty there were Dominick and Felix and Brian and little Sheila ; and she was not really needed at Crane's Nest, where, now that Pauline had gone, Terence's favourite sister, Mrs. Creagh, a widow without incumbrances, was ready to come and take charge.

Mrs. Hildebrand had been a great beauty. Meg was a plainer image of her. Where the mother's hair had fallen in golden ringlets Meg's was brown, with just a shade of red in it. She had no pretension to the exquisite purity of complexion, the correctness of features, the blueness of eyes so blue as to be almost exaggerated. But there was a fawn-like grace about Meg—a shyness which came suddenly at the frankest moments. Some people had found that mingled shyness and candour irresistible.



The Archduchess had praised Meg's discretion with a special warmth. It had prevented complications. If she had only known, Meg's discretion was disinclination. A white and gold Imperial Hussar had no dazzlement at all for Meg Hildebrand.

There was a picture of the late Mrs. Hildebrand before which her husband was wont to stand, pointing out its beauties to the daughter who was most like her in expression and character of all the children, although she had neither her eyes nor her hair nor her complexion. There was a floating gauze scarf about Mrs. Hildebrand in the picture out of which the opulent shoulders, smooth as ivory, ascended.

"Look at her, Meg," he would say. "They used to say she was as like the Empress of the French as though she were her twin. If your hair wasn't brown and your eyes hazel and if your colour hadn't a bit of brown in it as well, you'd be the image of her. And to think, when they were all running after her up in Dublin, that she gave up everything for me and was just a good little woman, looking after the house and the children till the day she died! Ah, well, my poor girl," apostrophising the picture, "you might have done better for yourself—but you couldn't have been better loved!"

For a short time Meg gave herself up to the joy of being at home. She loved every inch of the Irish earth and air; after her exile she felt as though

she could take every soft-voiced old man or woman she met with on the road to her heart ; she made friends with every blue-eyed child, and the fishermen, the urchins driving the cows to and from the bog, the shepherd with his sheep. All except the little ones remembered Miss Meg, and were as pleased to have her home as though it were a personal matter to themselves. She loved the grey and brown country of stone walls and rocks and bogs. The animals, the wild, friendly dogs that pawed her all over on the slightest encouragement, the patient little donkeys under the carts, the cattle and sheep browsing on the scant pasture : everything was full of delight to her, perhaps the more delightful because she realised that she enjoyed them only for the time.

“ Why would you be going ? ” Terence Hildebrand asked in an aggrieved voice, when after a month or six weeks lazing his daughter talked of going out on the world again. “ Isn’t there plenty for you to do at home ? You were always headstrong, Meg, or you’d never have left us. Not but what you were a good girl to me and the children.”

“ I’m not going to leave Ireland this time,” Meg said. “ I’m too fresh from the pangs of homesickness to have forgotten them. I’m going up to town next week to my godmother while I look for something. There won’t be so much money—

but there won't be the home-sickness, and I can run down and see you all if the craving comes upon me."

She had arrived at her godmother's house in Stephen's Green, Dublin, one of those baffling houses which look mere slips outside and are unexpectedly spacious and stately within. It was the thick of the Dublin season, and Lady O'Neill was out at an afternoon concert at the Castle when she arrived, but the servants took charge of her as though she were the child of the house. She was enjoying a generous tea by the fire, in the brown oak-panelled room, where, if you lifted a Persian rug before the fireplace you saw on the boards the print of a little child's foot in blood—memorial of an unknown tragedy that not all the soap and scrubbing-brushes in the world would wash out—when her godmother arrived.

"I hurried home for you, Meg," she said. "Don't thank me, child. What with the new music that I can't make head or tail of—give me Mozart—and the queer people one meets in society nowadays, I sacrificed nothing in leaving early. So you want to be at work again? I hope that young rascal, Master Terry, appreciates his sister. Why not stay with me till after Easter? I'd like to have a girl to take out: and I've some old lace spoiling for some one to wear it. You won't? Well, you were always obstinate, Meg."



She had to hear all the news of Crane's Nest. Then, having failed to persuade Meg to stay and dance through a Castle season, she became suddenly helpful and businesslike.

"You wouldn't do it, Meg," she said, "if I wasn't a distressed lady. But since I am, and since Crane's Nest is in the case of the old woman who lived in the shoe, I'll do my best to help you. As a matter of fact I've been making inquiries, for I knew your obstinacy, and I've come upon something. The Dowager Turloughmore put me on to it, poor old soul. Her daughter-in-law wants a companion. She must be a lady and accomplished, a good musician—and very discreet, else she'll be making eyes at Lord Erris the only son, who by all accounts is very handsome, poor boy. I said I thought I might answer for your discretion. The only thing is—it's a shame to send you there. Castle Eagle is not quite the place I'd select for my god-daughter, but you're healthy, Meg, and you're of a happy nature. Very sensible too and very kind. Poor Lady Turloughmore, I remember her; she was the merriest creature alive. It's no joke to be always looking out for a curse to fall on the one you love best. No wonder the son's delicate."

"What is it about the Turloughmores? There've been tragedies in the family, I know, but I've been a long time away and I don't know the story."



“ Oh, it’s a queer story : I don’t suppose there’s anything in it. They are a strange over-strung family and I suppose they have got to believe in the doom, as all the rest of Ireland does. The doom began with a Lord Turloughmore in the time of James the First. It was a time they were burning witches in England and Lord Turloughmore had lived a good deal in England and had got a taste for hunting a human quarry. Well, there was an old woman who was reputed a witch, and she had a plot of land with a cabin on it right in the middle of the Turloughmore property, and he had tried to get her out of it—it was an eye-sore to him—but she had resisted all his efforts. There doesn’t seem to have been anything in the accusation that she was a witch. She appears to have been a herbalist and to have supplied the poor people with herbal remedies for this and that complaint ; and no doubt she was a bit queer in her head, but—a kind creature, devoted to animals and they to her, even the wild ones.

“ Lord Turloughmore would have been glad enough to try her for witchcraft as he had seen it done in England ; but we had no witches in Ireland and we burnt none : we left the burning to the next world if there was burning to be done. Some of the foolish, ignorant people said that Biddy Pendergast could take the shape of any beast she liked

and that arose, I suppose, from the fact that animals were so often seen about her cottage. Lord Turloughmore was hunting one day when what did the fox do, and the hounds were just on top of him, but scamper in at the open door of Biddy's cottage, which was immediately bolted and barred behind him, although the huntsman swore he had seen Biddy, just before the hounds found, picking up sticks in a coppice three miles away.

“ Lord Turloughmore was up first behind the hounds, and, pushing his way through them, he kicked open the door of the cabin. The hounds rushed in, and immediately there began the greatest hullabaloo you ever heard within, and Lord Turloughmore stood with a smile on his face and would allow no one to pass.

“ Suddenly a scream came from the house and it curdled the blood of those who were standing near. An ancestor of your own, Sir Dominick Hildebrand, was there, and he shouted that the hounds were killing the old woman and he would not stand by to see murder done. Then some one called out that the fox was sitting up on the thatch as comfortable as could be, having come up the chimney, so that it wasn't the fox the hounds were growling and snarling over. Then Sir Dom Hildebrand closed with Lord Turloughmore, flung him to one side and rushed into the cabin. There sure enough was poor

old Biddy huddled up in one corner where the hounds had got her down and were tearing her to pieces as they tear a fox, and that's a sight I never like to see, for all that I was brought up in a sporting country. It was a sickening sight by all accounts, and there was the greatest trouble to get the hounds off, but it was too late to save the poor woman's life. She was pretty well torn to pieces. But while a spark of life remained in her she put a curse upon the Turloughmores. They said she tried to put a blessing on your ancestor who had pulled a hound from her throat with his two hands and if he wasn't so strong would have been unable to save himself from the brute. But while she blessed the Hildebrands the death-rattle was in her throat: she never finished.

"Turloughmore would have it that it was the soul of the witch that escaped the hounds up the chimney in the shape of a fox. They say the same fox is hunted to this day, and when they find him it means a run that leaves the hounds footsore and dejected, and the fox slipped over the edge of the world. He is known by a white star on his breast."

"And the curse?" asked Meg.

"Oh, the curse is, of course, that no Earl of Turloughmore dies in his bed. Oddly, not one has died in his bed, or so they say, since poor Biddy's curse. They've died in battle, in the hunting-field,



in all sorts of accidents. His Lordship's father was drowned when the hooker from Galway foundered in a big storm. The present Lord disregards the doom, says that he may as well have a good run for his money. Poor Flora, with her delicate son, is to be pitied. Her husband is never at home. He is away yachting just now. Her heart has been so long in her mouth where her husband is concerned that perhaps she grows used to the dread. A very dear creature is Flora Turloughmore."

"It will be a house with a shadow," said Meg.

"My dear, if you are afraid of it do not go. It is indeed a house with a shadow. But it is a very beautiful place, and the rule will be so gentle and sweet. There are not many places I should care to send my girl to as a companion. You will be safe with Lady Turloughmore. And—the salary is a large one. I wish that need not count with you, but it must."

The sound of the knocker upon the hall-door reached them where they sat in the oak-panelled room.

"That will be Flora," Lady O'Neill said hastily. "She said she would come to-day if she possibly could. How glad I am that you know all about it! You will be able to decide now, knowing that you are asked to go to a house with a shadow. She is

so charming a creature that you are certain to be attracted by her. You will know if it is worth it ! ”

The maid opened the door announcing :

“ Lady Turloughmore.”

Some one came in who had a fluttering air of youth in the twilight. It was such a figure as might have belonged to a woman in the late twenties. The lady came with a soft sound of silken garments, a delicate breathing of violets. She sat down in a chair facing Meg. The servant who had ushered her in brought a lamp. Before the shade was adjusted Meg saw the lady’s face.

The dark hair was grey about the temples. The face was fretted with fine little lines telling that Lady Turloughmore was not so young as her figure and carriage pretended. She smiled and the expression was brave and sad as winter sunshine, with its pathetic suggestion of a natural merriment.

“ We are very lonely, my boy and I,” she said. “ I hardly ever leave him, but I felt I must see you. Dear Lady O’Neill said I might come. You are better than I hoped for, Miss Hildebrand. I must always have people about me I can care for. I wonder—I wonder if you could come back with me to-night to Castle Eagle ! ”

“ She has only just arrived from the west,” said Lady O’Neill.

“ How inconsiderate I am ! ” Lady Turloughmore



said, in a soft, eager apology. "Forgive me, Miss Hildebrand. And, please, when can you come?"

Meg glanced at the charming face and found Lady Turloughmore irresistible.

"Nothing is unpacked as yet," she said. "I can go with you to-night. Anything further I require can follow me. And—I am so glad to come."

## CHAPTER II

### THE FOXES

IT was about eleven o'clock at night and pitchy dark when the travellers arrived at their destination. In the last stage of it they had driven for what seemed a long time up a steady ascent, and they had come within smell and hearing of the sea.

Meg, nodding with fatigue, could see nothing from the carriage windows but a darkness of stone walls and trees either side the road. She came suddenly awake when Lady Turloughmore spoke.

"We are nearly there; look yonder and you will see Castle Eagle through a break in the trees. We shall soon be at the park-gates. How dark it is! When the moon is up it will be as light as day."

Meg, wide-awake now, looked from the carriage window, and had her first glimpse of Castle Eagle, revealed by its many lit windows against the darkness of sky and trees. It seemed a huge place, standing up there outlined by its lights.

"Your little boy will be gone to bed," she said. "I shall not see him till the morning, I suppose?"

“ My little boy ! ” Lady Turloughmore repeated.  
“ I have no little boy. Ulick is twenty-seven.”

“ Oh, of course. How stupid of me ! I remember now that my godmother said —— ”

Meg pulled up short, remembering what it was that her godmother had said—then stumbled on again.

“ She said he was not very strong. Somehow I imagined he was a boy.”

“ He is not very strong.” There was a note of quiet sorrow in Lady Turloughmore’s voice. “ I blame myself for his ill-health. I would go hunting before he was born, though I was advised not to do it. His father met with what might have been a fatal accident before my eyes ; we were riding together, and we came to a ravine spanned by a couple of planks. He took his horse across quite safely. He has a great power over animals. They trust him. He is so strong and gentle.” She spoke with a proud and tender voice. “ He left his horse on the other side, brought me over, and went back for the little mare I was riding. She was a sweet creature, very nervous and high-spirited. She came with him gently enough, and he had got her more than halfway across when she caught sight of the depth below and stood still, trembling and sweating. seeing the danger many men would have left her to her fate. My husband is not like that. He tried

to coax her. Suddenly she plunged. The planks turned with her. I saw both of them fall. My dear—it is not a thing I talk about easily. I don't know why I tell it to you—at our first meeting too. The mare broke her poor pretty back in the fall. My husband—by the blessing of God, fell on a little ledge halfway down the ravine. He had to be pulled up by ropes, but till I saw him alive and well I thought he was dead. Wasn't it terrible ? ”

“ It was very terrible,” said Margaret. “ But—his being saved was wonderful. I think I should take it that, as you say, it was the blessing of God.”

“ That is what I most ardently desire, what I pray for, for my husband and son, morning, noon, and night. My dear, I have learnt to be a good prayer. Even when I am doing other things, talking, or reading, or walking about, my spirit is on her knees.”

“ I should feel after that experience,” said Meg, steadily, and wondering why she should say it, “ I should feel that they had special protection.”

“ I suppose I do feel it, in a sense,” returned Lady Turloughmore, “ else I should not have one happy hour, and I have many.”

While they talked they had passed a lit lodge where some one held open the gates. They had left the stone walls behind, and in the lifting of the



obscurity, for the moon had just looked over a distant wall of mountain, Meg saw that they were in a park, with groups of knotted and twisted trees standing out darkly against the lighter darkness of the grass.

The carriage rolled quickly over the smooth avenue till it stopped at a pair of gates, which the footman got down to open. Then on again past the shrubs and flower beds of a lawn. Presently it pulled up in front of a flight of stone steps, beyond which an open door showed the lighted hall.

Meg glanced over her shoulders as she followed Lady Turloughmore from the carriage up the steps. The house was situated on a high plateau, from which the country fell away in front. There was a balustrading beyond the flower beds in front of the house revealed by the light from the house-door. Above it the tops of a row of poplars were revealed. Apparently the front of the house descended by terraces to the lower lands.

She followed Lady Turloughmore into an octagonal hall from which doors went off between fluted and gilt pillars. The tone of the hall was gold and cream. In the upper part of the wall portraits took the place of the doors between the pillars. The hall was warmly carpeted with red. From a fireplace at one side came a warm glow, comfortable in the winter night. A red-carpeted stair ascended in



front of them. Down the stairs there came a young man walking slowly, one hand on the banisters.

“ Ah, Ulick ! We have got safely home.”

“ I hope you are not very cold, mother, I am glad you are back.”

“ Miss Hildebrand, my son, Lord Erris.”

Meg bowed. The young man looked at her with quick interest. In her one glimpse of him she saw that he was one of those invalids who ought not to be invalids. He was a big man. He looked as if he might be powerful. There was something very fine about the shape of his head. But the voice was languid, the handsome face fretted with lines of pain, the eyes sadly weary for young eyes.

He looked at Meg with sudden, quick attention.

“ Miss Hildebrand ! ” he repeated.

Lady Turloughmore put her hand through her son's arm.

“ Miss Hildebrand is so kind as to be willing to solace our lonely life, Ulick,” she said. “ Ah,”—a bright-looking, black-haired maid-servant had just come forward. “ You will take the young lady to her room, Kate. See that she has all she wants. Miss Hildebrand, there will be some food ready when you come downstairs. Please don't think of making a toilette.”

Meg followed the maid up the stairs, down a corridor, and was shown into a warm, comfortable

room. A fire glowed on the hearth, and there was a shaded lamp on a little table, which was drawn beside a comfortable-looking chair. The room was lined with wardrobes and drawers, with mirrors between as though the occupant of the room was to have as many dresses as Queen Elizabeth, and to be as vain of her person. There was just space enough between the wardrobes and the drawers for a little French bed, prettily curtained in chintz. In a corner a small door opened, which gave access to a tiny bathroom.

“ You’ll maybe be likin’ a bath before you go to your bed, Miss,” said Kate. “ I’ll lave you some warm towels before I go, after I’ve unpacked. Here’s your trunk now, Miss. Is there anything I could be gettin’ out of it for you ? ”

Meg had a humorous sense of the incongruity of her solitary trunk with all the wardrobes.

“ I think I’ll go down just as I am,” she said. “ I mustn’t keep Lady Turloughmore waiting.”

“ Indeed then she wouldn’t say one word if you wor to keep her waitin’ itself,” said Kate. “ Sure there isn’t a sweeter nor a patienter lady in the len’th and breadth of Ireland, an’ his young lordship the same, but the Earl’s very hasty, yet that kind o’ hastiness you’d forgive him. It isn’t very good for the temper to be always expectin’ somethin’ to

happen to ye, all on account of an ould villin that did somethin' wrong hundreds o' years ago. Is it now, Miss ? ”

“ I suppose it isn't,” said Meg, who had untwisted and shaken out her hair, and was about to coil it up again at the back of her head.

“ It's a terrible shame so it is,” said Kate, fussing about the room, “ to see the terror in her Ladyship's face sometimes. Well ! well ! My mother often told me not to be talkin' so much. What a beautiful head of hair you have, Miss ! What name was it her Ladyship said ? ”

“ My name is Hildebrand,” Meg answered, putting in the last hair-pin.

“ I thought 'twas that her Ladyship said,” the girl said, looking at Meg with an intent gaze. “ You wouldn't be—wan of the Hildebrands ? Wouldn't it be a quare thing if a Hildebrand of th' ould family was to come to this house ? ”

Meg did not feel altogether at liberty to discuss the family skeleton of her employers with a servant, though she was quite accustomed to the intimacy of the Irish servants, and the manner in which they identify their interests with the interests of those they serve. So she said nothing, but having completed her hair, moved towards the door.

“ You wouldn't be thinkin' I was talkin' for talkin's sake,” Kate said, as though she divined



Meg's thoughts. "Sure, my family sarved the Rosses of Turloughmore these hundreds o' years back. Aren't we like belongin' to the clan and the Earl of Turloughmore the Chief of us still? Me ould grandfather has the whole history of it at his fingers' ends. You wouldn't be thinkin' I was makin' free, Miss?"

"Oh, not at all," Meg said, with her hand on the door-handle. "I'm quite accustomed to the Irish ways and I love them, although I've been out of Ireland for five years."

"'Twas too long," said Kate, with conviction. "I'm glad you're in it now. 'Tis because I love the family that my heart lepped up at your name. I thought if a Hildebrand was to come it might take the doom off them. There's quare ould ways in this house for all it looks so cheerful. I don't know that I'd care to be in it if it wasn't for the family. There isn't much I wouldn't do for any of them."

Meg went downstairs to the dining-room. She was healthily hungry, for she had not eaten anything since her afternoon tea. While she was enjoying her meal she gathered from what Lady Turloughmore was saying that the Earl was on his homeward way.

"With a good wind he might be home some time on Wednesday morning," she said. "I hope now he will put up the yacht for the winter. It is



very cold. I don't see what pleasure he can find in it."

Lord Erris sighed, a heavy sigh that startled Meg.

"I wish I could be with him," he said.

"Dear Ulick! after all there is the hunting."

"Yes, there is the hunting."

Presently Meg, having finished her meal, went upstairs leaving the mother and son together.

"Don't be kept awake by the owls, Miss Hildebrand," said Lady Turloughmore. "The woods are full of them and the old tower. You will hear them unless you sleep very well."

"I am sure I shall not hear anything once my head touches the pillow," Meg replied.

Lord Erris came out into the hall to light her candle for her. There was something that hurt her heart in the way he walked. He had a halting and a dragging gait, and yet it suggested a free stride, somehow hampered and clogged. There must be something wrong with his foot, she supposed. In the candle-light she saw his face clearly for the first time. It was a handsome face, regular-featured: a very handsome broad forehead, with a sweep of dark hair across it: a pair of fine dark eyes, a sensitive mouth. A masculine face in spite of the lines of weariness upon it and something of mist and shadow that lay over it.

“ I am very glad you have come, Miss Hildebrand,” he said cordially.

Meg flushed with pleasure ; and looked down, with one of her charming, shy glances.

“ I am very glad you are glad,” she said. “ I am very glad to have come.”

“ You won’t want to go away when you know us better ? ”

“ I am quite sure I shall not.”

He watched her go up the stairs before he went back, with his dragging step, to the dining-room.

Meg slept. The room was warm in firelight. The night was bitterly cold outside—bright moonlight, yet with a haze about the moon and an ominous bank of cloud away to the south-east. She slept and dreamt pleasant dreams, in which she was come to Castle Eagle as a deliverer and Lord Erris begged her not to go away. In the dream she had an exaggerated sentiment of tenderness, of aching pity for him, such as one will have in a dream for a person to whom one is indifferent in one’s waking moments.

She awoke with a start to the bright moonlight in the room and a sound of the baying of dogs. She looked about the unfamiliar room. She had a sleepy wonder as to whether there were kennels at Castle Eagle. As she lay awake something thin and sharp in the quality of the baying struck her

ears. Those were not hounds. She knew too much about fox-hounds to be deceived into believing that short, sharp yelping to proceed from a pack.

Suddenly the story Lady O'Neill had told her came to mind, and she was afraid. There was something sinister in the yelping, as though a pack of spectral hounds were baying. Could it be—was it possible that the hounds who had taken part in the killing of the witch came back as goblins to Castle Eagle? Ridiculous! Was she going to have nerves already? It would never do to cultivate nerves if she was to stay at Castle Eagle; and she had said to Lord Erris that she would stay.

She got out of bed and went to the window. After all, the matter might be simple enough; capable of a simple natural explanation. Why should a thin baying have power to frighten her like this? to set her heart beating? Indeed it sounded like the ghosts of dogs dead and gone, baying the moon. She said to herself that there was nothing to be afraid of only Fear. She was in the hands of God; so long as her cowardice did not place her outside that guardianship.

The moon had risen splendidly and was throwing its hard white light over the courtyard upon which her window looked. The courtyard, enclosed by the three sides of the house, was open on the fourth. The moon high above the mountains to the



eastward, poured its full light without a shadow. The three sides of the quadrangle slept. Not a light moved in the windows, although Meg would have thought that the house must be wakened by the din.

She saw a strange sight. The courtyard was full of life. Foxes were everywhere, standing, sitting, prowling by the walls. Every time the barking seemed like to die away one fox in the centre of the pack, bigger than the others, raised its head and started the yelping, and the others joined in afresh.

A curious sight! She had never heard of the like. Had the bitter cold—the earth had been frozen now for days—sent the foxes in search of food. While she watched, a fox came into the courtyard, plainly a tired fox, such as she had often seen at home at Crane's Nest, going at a weary trot across the lawns some day the hounds were out.

Her first fear passed: she was reassured by the fact that obviously these were real, living foxes. While she looked one sat down, and very deliberately scratched his ear with his hind leg. She laughed. Certainly they were not phantoms.

While she stood looking out, absorbed in the curious sight, the foxes, as though moved by some law of their kind, wheeled about and trotted out of the courtyard. For the first time—she had been



deceived by the moonlight—she noticed that a light snow had fallen. The courtyard was under snow : so was the surrounding country and the distant hills. There was more to come, for the wind rose and sighed : her windows shook and somewhere in the house a door slammed.

It was like Kipling, she said to herself as she dozed asleep, too tired with her double journey to be kept long awake even by the strange thing she had seen. It was exactly like a story out of Kipling.

## CHAPTER III

### THE HOUSE OF FOXES

MEG awoke to a red dawn and Kate standing by her bedside carrying a tray on which there was the morning cup of tea.

“ Good morning, Miss. I hope you slept well,” she said, as she proceeded to light the fire. “ I wouldn’t get up if I was you—not yet, till the room’s warmer. I wonder you do be alive at all, havin’ the windows open like that. It ’ud give any wan a cowl to look at them, so it would. There’s my grandfather alive an’ well, an’ he a young man an’ courtin’ the night o’ the Big Wind, an’ he never opened his window, I’ve heard say, all his life, nor none of his family. I’ll tell you sometime how he lost the first umbrella was ever seen in the parish that same night. It belonged to Father Pat McCluskey the parish priest. He’d brought it from London for a great curiosity an’ he lent it to my grandfather to hold over my grandmother : they’d been with him about the marriage. ’Twas

as big as a tent, an' when the wind broke on them it very nearly carried them out to say."

The narrative ceased on Kate's stooping her head to make a bellows of her mouth for the purpose of blowing up the fire.

"I hope there'll be no wind now anyway," she added. "Not with his Lordship on the say. The poor mistress does be heartbroke till she has him safe."

She came and took up the tray.

"Now you've a nice little fire to get up by, Miss Hildebrand," she said. "The mistress herself bid me make you comfortable an' I'd die for the mistress. She doesn't be lavin' me to the housekeeper for orders. She knows I'd do more for herself, though Mrs. Browne's a dacint woman an' not so strict as some housekeepers I've heard tell of. I'd better be goin' or she'll be callin' me a chatterbox. She says it's my one fault."

A bell rang somewhere in the house and Kate fled.

Meg lay awake for a little while before she got up, thinking of the foxes in the night. She considered whether it might have been a dream. But she was sure it could not have been. She remembered the natural attitudes of the foxes. She had never known them to go in packs and approach dwelling houses before. But she was quite sure

there was nothing of the dream or the vision about it. They were real foxes : and she had seen them.

She got up and dressed herself. She was first downstairs and there was no one in the dining-room when she entered it. There were no letters for her as yet : but there were the morning papers and some weekly papers and magazines lying folded on a side table. She looked about the luxurious room. Her feet sank in the pile of the carpets. There was beautiful china and silver on the table. Nothing was new, nothing of yesterday or the day before. The carpets and curtains had had time to mellow their tints, as had the walls and the family portraits.

A beautiful Clumber spaniel, with a coat like grebe, and orange silk ears, came and thrust a friendly nose in her hands. She stooped and looked at his collar.

"I am Lord Erris's friend, Prince," was the inscription. The dog appealed to her. She loved all dogs ; but there was something nobly condescending in the air of this dog as he made friends which was a subtle flattery as though some distinguished person had trusted her.

When she patted him he whined, ill at ease about something, and looked towards the windows. For the first time she noticed the windows. They were diamond-paned, deep-ledged. In each window there was a heraldic lozenge. She went a little nearer



to inspect them. In the lower section of the windows the lozenges showed armorial bearings with the motto "Goddes Way is My Staye." In the upper lozenges was alternately a fox and a large-winged, greyish-winged bird. A swan: no, not a swan. She leant nearer to look. It was a wild goose. Often she had seen them of autumn evenings flying high over the grey sky across the stubble, in the strange wedge they form when they are flying.

She wondered if the fox derived from the uncanny story which had brought the calamity to the family. Calamity! She would not believe it. Already her heart cried out passionately against the thought of calamity to the family of Turloughmore. Why should they suffer, innocently, for the cruelty and sin of a long-dead man? God would not permit it. Surely God would not permit it.

The wild geese were more easily explicable. She supposed some of the family must have been of the Wild Geese, those Irish who fought for King James against King William and after the Treaty of Limerick sailed away from Ireland and took service in the armies of France and Spain and Austria.

The dog's evident uneasiness attracted her attention. He wanted to go out. He was pacing to the last window in the room and back again, evidently inviting her to a morning walk.

She went with him, her hand on his head. She

found that the last window was in fact a door. It opened on the courtyard surrounded by three sides of the house, on which she had looked last night. The sun had risen out of the red dawn and was shining on the courtyard: no sign of storm yet, but a fine, clear, frosty morning.

She opened the window and went out. The snow had frozen since last night and was crisp under her feet. The dog began to move about growling to himself. He had come upon the scent of the foxes.

She looked down at the snow. Certainly it had been no dream, no illusion of the night, no uncanny happening. The track of the foxes was everywhere, frozen in the snow. She had been right when she said they were real, living foxes. A spectral pack does not leave the snow printed all over with its pads.

The dog whined. All of a sudden she was aware that she knew something she had not known she knew, as the mind will receive an impression and put it away without looking at it, to discover it later on.

The fox, bigger than the others, who had seemed to be the chief of the pack and to lead the chorus of barking, had had a white star on its breast.

In the moonlight it had shone on the red foxy coat like a star of silver.

She was for a moment in the grip of the supernatural. Then she pulled herself together sharply. What was she thinking of? There was nothing very remarkable about a fox being splashed with white. Why should he not be, any more than a dog?

She went back into the dining-room, the dog following her with a dejected air. He had barely flung himself, sighing heavily, before the fire when Lord Erris came in, his lame foot dragging.

"Good morning, Miss Hildebrand," he said, "you are down first. What a shame there should be no one to bid you welcome on your first morning! I dare say my mother is tired after her journey."

"Prince was very kind in making me welcome," Meg said. "He was a gracious host."

"Ah, I am glad of that. It is a tribute to you. Prince doesn't take notice of every one. Isn't he perfectly well-bred? I don't mean in the ordinary sense, but in the sense of good manners."

"He is indeed. He is a very fine gentleman."

"He is out of spirits this morning. Did you hear him howl in the night? It was very bright moonlight."

"No. I did not hear him."

"You slept well in spite of the owls? I am glad of that. You don't look as though your double journey yesterday had fatigued you over much."



Meg coloured and glanced sideways at him with her bewildering shyness. She had seen her face in the glass and she knew that in spite of the disturbance of the night it was fresh and glowing. The ease and satisfaction of heart which her home-coming had brought about had taken effect on her health and looks. She felt as though she would give anything if she could have imparted something of the healthy zest of life she felt in herself to the weary-looking man before her, with his sad air of distinction.

"I hope you will be happy at Castle Eagle," he said wistfully.

"I am sure I shall be very happy," she returned.

"Will you make the tea or shall I? My mother may not be down for quite a long time. She wishes us not to wait for her."

She had an idea that it hurt him to stand long on his lame foot. So she held out her hand for the tea-pot, without disputing the question as to who should make the tea. She looked at him frankly, and again she had the shyness.

"I am considered a very good tea-maker," she said; "for all that I have lived nearly six years in Austria."

He sat down as though the rest was grateful to him, and watched her making the tea, with a light in his eyes as though he found the sight pleasant.

"You have been in Austria," he said. "My



forbears had a great deal to do with that country, but I have never been there. I have not been strong enough to travel."

She understood. It would have been bitter, especially seeing that he was framed for strength, to drag a maimed foot over the world. She had a memory of Byron and his bitterness—how the club-foot poisoned his life.

As though he read her thoughts he smiled at her, and the smile was very attractive. There was something appealing about it. He had inherited his mother's charming smile.

"My mother is too tender to me," he said. "An only son. She wraps me in cotton-wool. I have not grown used to my fellow-creatures."

She made his tea and brought it to him before he could rise to fetch it for himself. He got up and went to the sideboard to carve something for her, explaining that breakfast was always an informal meal at Castle Eagle. He came back and lifted the covers of various silver dishes asking her what she would like. There seemed a superfluity for just two, and Meg thought of the breakfast-table at Crane's Nest, with all the rosy faces about it, the heaped dish of stirabout, the "door-steps" of bread and jam, the steaming cups of cocoa. How the children would enjoy these dainties!

She took the first thing he offered her. She

was healthily hungry and quite ready to do credit to some of the good things. She was unconscious while she was eating that he watched her, toying with the food on his own plate. He smiled as their eyes met.

“It is nice to see any one so hungry,” he said.

“I’ve a disgraceful appetite,” she confessed, laughing. “Wasn’t it Byron who couldn’t endure to see a woman eat a beefsteak? He would have been dreadfully disgusted with me; not that I care for beefsteak. Please don’t be shocked.”

“I like it. My mother eats nothing, and I have not much of an appetite. I don’t get out enough, except in hunting weather.”

“Oh, but you should get out always.”

He winced, and she guessed that he did not like to face the world, afoot.

“One can always ride,” he said. “By the way, Hildebrand is not a common name. It is an odd thing that a Hildebrand should be under this roof. You are a Hildebrand of——”

“Crane’s Nest in the County Roscommon.”

“I wonder——”

He did not say what he wondered.

Meg opened her lips. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him the curious happening of the night.

“Crane’s Nest,” he said: “a pretty name. Birds—and beasts have had much to do with the history of this house. You noticed the foxes and

the wild geese in the window? You will find the fox all over this house. Do you see him there in the carving of the mantel-piece? The newels of the stairs are supported by foxes. It was dark last night when you came or you would have seen at the foot of the steps a pair of foxes carved in stone. The man who built this house flung defiance perhaps in the face of fate. This used to be called the House of Foxes. A hundred years ago it was changed to Castle Eagle. You must read about it in the County History."

It was a curious outburst of confidence, for it was a confidence, though he seemed to talk in an easy unembarrassed way.

"I wonder if you knew what you were undertaking," he said. "A beautiful young girl like you. A Hildebrand. Odd that a Hildebrand should come to this house."

She answered him quietly, almost forgetting to be shy.

"I am not afraid of shadows," she said. "We are in the hands of the good God."

"Ah, you believe that. He allows strange things to happen sometimes."

"Not if we place ourselves in His hands, I firmly believe. If we choose to stay outside them, we may be afraid."

"Certain things may be of the devil and not of God? We may yield too readily to the devil?"



“ I believe that God is stronger than the devil, as the old people say.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Lady Turloughmore, who came, making profuse gentle apologies for the lateness of her appearance.

The dog went to greet her quietly, and lay down on the edge of her skirt when she had taken her place at the breakfast-table.

“ I am so glad it is a beautiful morning for your first morning here,” she said. “ No sign of wind. Are you fond of flowers, Miss Hildebrand? Ulick and I are devoted to flowers. You must see the houses after breakfast. Such a beautiful, quiet, golden day.”

It was as she had said. There was no sign of the fulfilment of the promise of the wind given by the red dawn.

“ The yacht will not make much headway in this calm,” she went on. “ We shall not see your father as soon as I hoped.”

“ We may get a bit of wind about sundown,” Lord Erris said. “ Besides—because it is windless here, it does not follow that there is no wind off the south-west of England. I think there is a promise of wind. The sun rose redly.”

“ But not of storm, Ulick,” said Lady Turloughmore with something of anguish in her voice.



"My dear mother, we are not long without wind on this coast, I see no indication of a storm."

"I wonder if your father has started."

She turned to Meg with the bright appealing gaze which made the girl feel as though she would do anything to save or please Lady Turloughmore. Something of the same feeling she had given the Archduchess Magda, which had made the leaving her a tearing-up by the roots, even though it was for going home.

"You will forgive the preoccupation with our own affairs," she said. "This is to be my husband's last yachting trip this year. The beautiful open autumn has made him keep to the yacht. But she will lie up after this voyage."

A footman came in with a telegram on a salver. For a second Lady Turloughmore's face whitened as she tore it open.

"The yacht left Falmouth Harbour last night," she said, "with a good wind. If he is not becalmed he might be in to-morrow. This frost will put a stop completely to the hunting. While it lasts there will be nothing for your father to do, Ulick, nor for you."

She was still a little white though her lips smiled. Obviously Lady Turloughmore was one of those old-fashioned people to whom the sight of a telegram brings a pang of dread.

## CHAPTER IV

“ IT WOULDN'T BE THE FOXES ”

MEG had been made free of the household at Castle Eagle. She had been up and down stairs with Lady Turloughmore. She had made acquaintance with Mrs. Browne the housekeeper and Bridget the cook, to say nothing of Phelim the butler, a silver-haired, rosy-cheeked little old man of an almost ecclesiastical dignity. She had seen the gardens and the houses ruled by Matthew the gardener, who had a whole troop of men and boys working under him. She had peeped in at the clean, bright stalls of the stables, and had caressed the silky noses of the hunters and the sleek sides of the carriage horses. She had been introduced to a litter of collie puppies in the stableyard, and she had admired the wide-muzzled, deep-chested Alderneys who were Lady Turloughmore's special property, and supplied the house with milk.

By noon the heat of the sun had somewhat thawed the roads and Lord Erris and Lady Turloughmore went out riding. Meg felt glad that Lord Erris was not too much of an invalid to ride. She

had the sympathy to absent herself while he mounted, but, coming to the door to receive a message from Lady Turloughmore, she saw Lord Erris already in the saddle. On horseback his weakness and disabilities vanished. She seemed to see already what manner of man he ought to be, doing the things his fellow-men did.

After they had ridden away she went up to the little room at the end of an upper corridor where old Julia, who had been Lord Turloughmore's nurse and his son's, sat, spectacles on nose, darning and mending.

Lady Turloughmore had explained to Meg about Julia, how she was very old, yet liked to think herself of importance in the house, so did such sewing and mending as her eyes permitted her, and even yet looked after Lady Turloughmore's lace and fine things, kept the linen darned, and was always ready with needle and thread to do any repairing that was necessary.

Another of her duties was to see to the airing of the linen. The message was concerned with some of the preparations for Lord Turloughmore's homecoming. When Meg reached the room which was sacred to Julia and her sewing—there was an inner room leading off it in which Julia slept—there was linen airing before the fire and the room was full of the warm, sweet smell of it.



“ Indeed her Ladyship ought to ha' trusted me,” Julia said with some offence. “ I'm not that ould nor bothered in my head, though I've my good days and my bad days, that I'd forget the damask towels for his Lordship. 'Tisn't likely that I wouldn't give my best to him that was the child at my breast.”

“ Is that a rent I see in your skirt, Miss ? ” she asked, distracted by her professional interest from her little grievance. “ Sit down there, Miss Hildreth, if that's your name, an' I'll put a stitch in for you. Her Ladyship calls this room ‘ The Sign of the Stitch in Time.’ Her Ladyship's very pleasant. I'm not sayin' I always know what she's laughin' about, the crathur. Sure, why wouldn't she laugh while she can ? ”

“ Why not indeed ! ” responded Meg, sitting down obediently in the low basket-chair made of twisted straw ropes, while the old woman lifted up the skirt which must have caught in something or other during Meg's garden progress and been torn unknown to her. Meg's sidelong gaze at Julia was a delight to see, if any one had been there to see it. She would have said herself that she loved Julia.

The light was very strong in the room, which was as warm as a hothouse because of the sun beating on the window panes. There were three windows to the room, which projected in a bow at



the end of the corridor, and the sun in its mid-day strength was on two of the windows.

She could see the innumerable fine lines of age in the old face as Julia leant nearer to her, darning the rent in the skirt. The kindness in Meg's eyes, the compassion, was charming to see.

"What a beautiful warm room you have, Julia," she said. "And what a beautiful view from the windows! I'd no idea the sea was so near."

"I wouldn't care if it wasn't. I don't like the same say," said Julia. "It drowns many mothers' sons. An' I don't like the look of it to-day, though I wouldn't say it to her Ladyship for the world. 'Tis fr' ttin' me so it is to see thim cat's paws on the water an' his Lordship comin' home. I never seen them yet that they didn't betoken a storm."

The sea was glittering and tossing in the sun. Nothing could have been less ominous to the inexperienced eye: but the surface of the water was fretted with ruffled streaks which must be the cat's paws the old woman talked of.

"There was a red dawn," said Meg.

"There was so and 'tis always red for wind," Julia said, in a queer monotonous tone, "but I never seen it as red as the mornin' of the day the hooker from Galway was lost, and his Lordship's father's body was washed in on the next tide. I ought to know about wind and the signs of it. Why wouldn't I?"

Didn't I lose my own man and my three fine sons by that same treacherous baste of a say, that's lyin' out there now purrin' and shovin' out her claws like a cat in the sun? Och, indeed, if I didn't know who would? ”

“ His Lordship's father! You mean the last Lord Turloughmore? ”

“ Who else, alanna? I was nursin' his present Lordship then and havin' the finest of everything. These rooms were the nurseries. I used to turn from the good food, fond and all as I was of the baby, thinkin' of my own child that I was robbin' for him. Her Ladyship—her old Ladyship, I mean—sent for Michael at last, fearin' the frettin' would injure her baby. Michael never grudged his Lordship anything. Poor Michael—he was lost the time the ferry went down between here and the islands. Deary me, I've had a long life, child! I'll be seventy-nine years of age come Michaelmas. Many's the fine man and woman I've seen down; an' sometimes whin I'm here by myself I can't tell whether 'tis the last Lord is in it or the present Lord. They brought the ould Lord—not that he was ould then,—no oulder than his Lordship is now—an' they laid him just there on the rug at your feet. They carried him along the passage in a sail, an' they brought him here because it was a summer mornin' an' the fires all low, but there was a beautiful fire

burnin' here and the blankets and sheets airin' for his bed, just the same as they are now for his son's."

She looked up at Meg, still holding the skirt between her fingers, and her gaze was very far away, as though the old wits were wandering.

"There do be times," she said, "whin I hear the drippin' of the water from the sail an' the feet of the men comin' along the passage to this room. An' I do see the drowned man lyin' stretched out just at your feet where they put him down. We couldn't bring him to for all we tried. He'd been in the water too long."

Margaret started and looked down, almost as though she could see the drowned Lord Turloughmore lying at her feet.

"Am I frightenin' ye, dear?" the old woman asked, with lingering tenderness. "Sure, I wouldn't do that, not for anything you could give me. But isn't it a terrible thing to live in a house where you can't be happy for one minnit for fear of what'll happen? Isn't it awful for the happy to die? Look at her Ladyship!—she was young an' lively an' so much in love wid his Lordship that she wint agin every one to marry him. God help her, isn't the joy crushed out of her for fear of what'll happen? An' her beautiful son that ought to be a fine man by rights, look at him! 'Tisn't only the poor lame foot. It's the doom of the family that's lyin' upon him, for



all her Ladyship blames herself for his misfortune. I wish his Lordship was safe home.”

“ So do I,” said Meg. “ But all the same, Julia ” —she put her hand on the old woman’s arm kindly— “ I can’t believe all this story of a doom. God is stronger than the devil. We are all in the hands of God. I can’t believe that it is He who goes on punishing innocent people for one cruel and wicked action done hundreds of years ago. If the Earls of Turloughmore have died as they have died, it is because they have taken more risks than other men. Every one knows how brave and adventurous they were—— ”

“ God help you ! You won’t be long in this house till you change your mind.”

Meg began to feel creepy in spite of herself, but she refused to be frightened by these vain fears and shadows.

“ It might be,” she said, “ that because they were expecting the doom it came upon them. Who can say now but that the memory of the doom paralysed a drowning man who might else have made a brave fight for his life. I believe these old stories are nothing but superstition. I should refuse to believe them in the Name of God.”

Julia bowed her head with an air of resignation.

“ God forbid, Miss Hildreth, that there’s anything I’d tell you not to believe in that Name.



Indeed why would I be makin' you sorrowful? Didn't I feel the minnit I laid eyes on you that you wor come to this house for its good? It isn't me that 'ud be frightenin' you out of it: I said to myself the minnit I seen you that you had the bravest lookin' face I ever seen."

Meg's heart lifted oddly at the old woman's praise. She blushed as she stood up. The rent in her skirt was mended, and mended neatly.

"Thank you very much, Julia," she said. "It's beautifully done. I'm so glad you have a good opinion of me. Look at the sun shining on those hills and the Thousand Isles far away. I can't believe that God put all that brightness into the world to leave us to the powers of darkness."

"Say it to her Ladyship, Miss Hildreth. Say it to her Ladyship. Often she wants the heart in her lifted up."

"I shall do my best, Julia: you may be sure of that. But my name is not Hildreth. It is Hildebrand, Margaret Hildebrand."

"*Eh?*"

Julia leant a little nearer eagerly.

"You said Hildebran', did you? Sure that was the name of the other gentleman—the one that done what he could to save ould Biddy Pendergast from the dogs. Wasn't it a terrible pity she was in it, at all, that she didn't die out of it before ever she

put her curse on a fine ancient family like the Earls of Turloughmore. Her ould body and bones wasn't worth it."

Meg allowed this extraordinary point of view to pass unchallenged. She was used to Irish ways of thinking.

"Hildebrand is my name," she said. "As a matter of fact, Sir Dominick Hildebrand was an ancestor of mine."

"An' ye prospered, dear, ye prospered? Ould Biddy's blessin' was as good for you as her curse was bad for the Earls of Turloughmore?"

"We're happy and healthy," Meg answered. "If money is a blessing we haven't got that. We're poor."

"So is the best in Ireland. The dirty money is as often a curse as a blessin'. If ould Biddy was a witch or not I don't know—but she had the wisdom to send after ye what's better thin money. You're good and lovesome and bonny an' your head's as right as your heart. You've come, a Hildebran', into the house of the Rosses of Turloughmore. An' ye come without any will of your own. Wisha maybe ould Biddy's satisfied, the ould divil. Maybe the luck'll come to Castle Eagle at last an' the curse be off the family."

"I pray that it may be so," said Meg, seriously. She was looking out over the expanse of waters

shining in the sun. The sea had a turbidly grey tinge, and the long ripples Julia had called "cat's paws" crept over its surface.

"I saw something very strange last night," she said. "I was awakened by barking."

"It would be the hounds. Their kennels are down in the hollow, out of sight of the windows. I hope they didn't disturb you, Miss."

"I thought they were dogs," Margaret said, "but they were not. I went and lifted the blind and looked out. The courtyard was full of foxes."

"Glory be to God! What are you sayin' at all, at all?"

The words rang out in a scream of mortal terror. The old woman was staring with an expression of terrible fear and anguish.

"You don't know what you're sayin' at all, child," she said. "Is it foxes? Sure it wasn't *foxes*! Ye only dhramed it. Ye might well dhrame it, for aren't the foxes all over the house? Ye wor dead-tired last night, an' in the mornin' ye woke up an' ye thought ye saw the foxes whin ye wor only dhramin'."

The old woman's agitation was extreme. Great tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"It wasn't foxes," she whimpered. "Sure it 'ud kill her Ladyship if ye wor to tell her ye seen the foxes. Ye'll hould your tongue about it for the



love of God. What 'ud bring the like into the courtyard by night at all? ”

“ I'm very sorry,” said Meg, frightened herself, she hardly knew of what; “ I wish I hadn't seen them. They were really foxes and I did see them. I found their tracks in the snow this morning when I went out.”

“ I heard the dogs meself. They wor barkin' terrible hard about three o'clock. Why would you see the foxes, a stranger, that doesn't belong to the family at all? A Hildebran'! Ye'd have no right to see them.”

“ Perhaps,” said Meg, more and more frightened at the effect she had produced. “ Perhaps, after all, it was only a dream. But why should you be so alarmed about the foxes, if they were real foxes and not ghostly ones? They couldn't do any harm.”

She remembered the fox with the star on its breast and how it had lifted its head and barked towards the window.

“ It might be possible,” she went on, “ that foxes might be driven to the habitations of men by excessive cold or starvation, and it has been cold. Why should they frighten you? They are harmless beasts enough except to the hen-roosts.”

The old woman sat rocking herself to and fro, the tears still flowing.



“ It would be the greatest of bad luck,” she said, “ that brought ye to Castle Eagle if you was to see the foxes. But how could ye see them, barrin’ ye wor wan o’ the family, an’ you’re not that? Ye dhramed it, I tell you. I wouldn’t be sayin’ a word about it to her Ladyship if I was you ! ”

Her voice was suddenly wheedling.

“ I won’t say there’s anything in the foxes,” she went on. “ Sure it might be that they’d be dhruv in, it bein’ a hard winter, an’ the ground froze as grey as a stone. ’Tisn’t as if they wor seen by wan o’ the family. God help her, she has enough to bear without being bothered by dhrames.”

“ I won’t say a word about it. I’m so sorry I said anything to you, Julia.”

“ So am I. I’ll be shakin’ like an ould leaf in an autumn wind till the Earl’s safe home. But I won’t distract her wid me fears. Besides, I don’t believe anything has happened him. Wouldn’t I know it if the child of my breast was to be tossin’ about out there where his father tossed, the sport o’ the waves, an’ him so battered an’ bruised whin the say threw him up that he might have been taken for any one but the Earl.”

She got up and began to fold the sheets with shaking hands.

“ Ye gev me a fright, Miss Hildebran’, wid them ould foxes,” she said, with a piteous air of

offence, “ but I’ve thrown it off, for it couldn’t be the foxes, you bein’ a stranger. The night the hooker from Galway wint down the wild geese was flyin’ agin the windows of the house, batin’ wid their wings fit to break them into smithereens. I heard them myself; an’ there was a terrible desolation in their cries. His Lordship was very kind to bird and baste. There’s more than Christians fed from Castle Eagle in the hard weather, whin ye couldn’t break the ice on the ponds, and the say itself is frozen. Why wouldn’t they lament him? And wasn’t Earl Patrick wan o’ the Wild Geese an’ the greatest. It might be *their* spirits that was in it that night.”

In many and many a night to come Meg heard the crying of the wild geese as they swept over the stubble fields, bare as your hand and frozen hard, an eerie sound in the night.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TOWER

THE evening of that first day the sun went down in pale splendour behind the hills. The sky was orange and amber. There was going to be a sharp frost, Meg thought, as she stood by the balustrading of the terrace, looking out over the wide expanse of country, dotted with little roofs and church-towers stretching away to the mountains. At the other side of the house Castle Eagle on its precipitous cliffs overlooked the sea.

It was a frosty evening already. The frosty stars were visible in the sky, hard as steel, and the twigs and grass-blades crackled under foot. There was a strange stillness on the evening where one little cloud, the shape of a porpoise, floated in the serene expanse of sky.

While she looked Lord Erris came to her side.

"You will be cold, Miss Hildebrand," he said.

"Not I," Meg replied. "I have been walking and I am tingling with heat."

"I am always cold," he said, and shivered in

his heavy coat. "I can hardly believe that other people are not cold too in this bitter weather."

"Feel!" she said, and laid one warm hand over his.

She was dismayed at the result of her simple action. He withdrew his hand as though hers stung him. The blood rushed to his face, then ebbed away. His eyes looking out at the expanse of sky took on a cold and forlorn expression as though they reflected the chilly greyness of November.

"You should not mock me with your health and strength," he said, as though the words had been wrung from him with bitterness.

"I am so sorry. I never thought of such a thing." Tears rushed to her eyes. "I only wanted to prove to you that I was warm. I beg your pardon."

"I ought to beg yours. I am like a sick wasp; I must sting what touches me. Forgive me, Miss Hildebrand. Do you see that cloud over there?"—with an air of changing the subject—"what do you suppose it means?"

"I have been thinking how odd it looks floating so darkly on the gold. I dare say it will drift away and be lost. See how bright the stars are!"

"I'm afraid it will not drift away, It will call companions to it. It is for wind. The glass is going up rapidly—too rapidly. I fear we shall



have a storm. My poor mother! I wish the yacht was safely in."

They turned and walked towards the house. The sun had dropped now behind the mountains and Castle Eagle stood up darkly against the sky. At one end of it was a square tower or bastion. Through the arrow-slits in the second storey they could see from where they were standing the light from the arrow-slits on the other side.

"How strong and dark the tower looks against the sky!" Meg said. "Would you think there was a light in it?"

"It is the lit sky on the other side showing through the arrow-slits. See the afterglow! We are going to have a sky of wonderful rose-leaves as we have it here sometimes."

The sun had sunk indeed, but there was a mighty conflagration going on somewhere out of sight. Ridge upon ridge of rosy fire began to tremble and burn in the west. It spread upwards and upwards. It broke into delicate flying feathers of rose that might have been lost from the wings of angels. The soft wild rosy fire burned and throbbed all over Heaven. The sea reflected it. Every pool of bog water in the country at their feet was on fire. The east had caught the glory and bloomed like a rose-garden.

"Did I not tell you?" said Lord Erris. "They

are scattering rose-leaves in Heaven. Let us look while we may. It will die out suddenly leaving a greyness behind."

"It is splendid!" Meg said, drawing a deep breath. "It is like seeing Heaven opened. I remember such skies sometimes—not often so splendid as this. Look at the tower! Wouldn't you think some one had lit a fire in it. How strong it looks! how mysterious! You remember—

"What in the midst lay but the tower itself,  
The round squat tower, blind as the fool's heart,  
In the whole world without a counterpart?"

In her excitement she forgot to be shy and looked at him with a glowing face.

"I remember. There is always something splendid in a strong tower against a lit sky!"

He blinked, looking at her as though she dazzled like the sky.

"What is that in there? Who could be warming his hands against those fires? Isn't the delusion of a fire perfect?" Meg said, pointing to the tower, where the arrow-slits were filled as with the reflected glow of a great fire.

"Unless it might be Conal M'Garvey."

"Conal M'Garvey?"

She looked her inquiry.

"You won't be frightened if I tell you. No? It was another pretty deed of one of my ancestors.

Oh, we have had our share of sins, to be expiated by a later generation. It is time the Rosses should cease. There is a far-away young cousin in a counting-house in England—he has the Rosse blood so much diluted that he might escape the sins of the fathers—who would succeed. He is coming to stay with us this coming summer, so you shall see him, Miss Hildebrand, if you do not fly away from us before then. A very proper jolly young Englishman is Algy Rosse. He should know something of finance perhaps, which no Rosse on this side ever did.”

He had forgotten about Conal M'Garvey. While he spoke the conflagration in Heaven died as suddenly as it had begun. There were only dead ashes for roses. The armies of the night seemed to advance from every side. The tower was in darkness, the arrow-slits showing no light.

“Conal M'Garvey's fire has gone out,” Meg said gravely.

They walked into the house, where the firelit hall sent out a warm breath to greet them. Prince, who had been standing by them as they talked outside, went in with them; there were a medley of dogs lying about before the roaring fire of coal and driftwood, some of whom came and fawned on them while others thumped a lazy tail by way of recognition. There was no one in the hall, but a



tea-table was set just within the screen and a kettle sang over the lit spirit lamp.

“Tell me about Conal M'Garvey,” she said. She had no idea how her furs became her. She had thrown off her coat, leaving it lying on the back of the tall chair in which she sat down. The golden brown of the fur seemed to throw up with a subtle flattery her white neck, her warm colour, the golds and browns of her shy eyes and her hair.

“You are sure you will not be frightened?” he said, looking at her and then looking away.

“I am not nervous. There were oubliettes at the Schloss—where I was with the Archduchess Magda. We spent our summers there. A river ran under the Schloss and then away to the Danube. It was supposed to carry the poor things dropped through the oubliettes away to the Danube and the sea. As a matter of fact, skeletons were found there in the hot summer when the river was low.”

“Ah, I see you have been in training for Castle Eagle.” A gleam of humour came into his sad eyes. “Conal M'Garvey was rather worse than the oubliettes. He was an Irish chieftain who originally owned the tower and the lands on which this house is built. An obliging early ancestor of mine, a Norman brigand, wanted M'Garvey's tower and lands, and since M'Garvey didn't quite see it he took the abominable course of building him up in



his tower. If you inspect the tower by daylight you will see where the arch was filled in. The Rosse of that day was a great church-builder. He knew all about masonry. He built up Conal M'Garvey so substantially that the filling of the arch will last as long as the tower itself. The tower keeps its secret."

Meg listened, trying to shake off a strange feeling which was coming over her. Was Castle Eagle bewitching her? The beautiful fire-lit room, the sensitive worn face of Lord Erris, the sleeping dogs—all the warm familiar things seemed to pass away. She was in a dream, an enchantment. She saw Conal M'Garvey in his saffron coat, haggard, wolf-hungry, perishing of hunger and thirst in the impregnable tower. She saw the famine in his eyes, the hollow misery of his cheeks. She heard a voice at her ears—Lord Erris was speaking to her in a tone of tender compassion and self-reproach.

"I am so sorry. I frightened you after all. You are not going to faint? Ah, that is better! You frightened me."

"I don't know what came over me," she said, and tears stood in her eyes. "Perhaps it was that I realise Conal M'Garvey more than the prisoners of the Schloss."

Lady Turloughmore came down the stairs into

the hall and shivered as she sat down in the warmest seat within the screen.

"I hope your father will not be becalmed," she said to her son.

"He will not have enough wind to carry him home. I think there will be some wind before morning."

"But not a storm, Ulick, not a storm," she said, as she had said last night.

He answered her again as he had answered her and with a tender patience.

"My dear mother, did I say a storm? The yacht must have some wind else she cannot get home. I think there will be some wind."

Lady Turloughmore's face assumed the expression which Meg came to know well later. She gained peace on her knees. Sometimes she lost it in a sudden terror, but it would come back to her face, a wonderfully young, smooth face though it was so sad—like the waves of the sea, filling her quiet eyes and composing her to a great tranquillity. Now she drew a little frame towards her on which she was making point lace and put in a few stitches.

"You have been out for a walk," she said to Meg. "I saw you go from my window. I hope it was a nice walk."

"It was lovely. The ground rang under my feet with frost as I walked."

“ Prince went with her, mother,” put in Lord Erris. “ Did you ever know such a quick capitulation ? ”

“ Prince is slow to make friends. You should be gratified, my dear.”

“ So I am,” Meg replied. “ There is something beautiful about Prince. You feel so flattered, as if a great and distinguished person had offered you friendship. His eyes are so beautiful when he wants to go and gobble up some yapping cur and you forbid it. He has an air of conceding it to you because he loves you.”

“ There are people,” said Lord Erris, “ to whom Prince would be just a dog. I pity people—don’t you, Miss Hildebrand, who don’t know what friendship with a dog means ? ”

“ I do, indeed,” said Meg, with one of the sudden blushes which were apt to follow any expression of feeling on her part.

“ I’ve been promising Miss Hildebrand that, if she will only stay with us, she shall have the privilege of making Algy Rosse’s acquaintance this summer.”

A little cloud fell over Lady Turloughmore’s face.

“ Why ‘ privilege,’ Ulick ? ” she asked. “ Surely the privilege would be the other way.”

“ Algy would be the first to accept that,” Lord Erris said suavely.

The kettle began to fling itself into convulsions, dancing a St. Vitus's dance on the spirit stove.

"I wonder if you would be so good as to make the tea, Miss Hildebrand?" said Lady Turloughmore, as though she asked a great favour. "I want to finish this little wheel I am making in my lace; and it will be very kind of you."

Meg flushed again, as she took the silver tea-pot and warmed it. She was very impulsive, too impulsive, Terence Hildebrand said, he having transmitted more of himself to Meg than any other child he had.

"I love to do it, Lady Turloughmore," she said. "I used to think I would do anything on earth because the Archduchess asked me. I wish you would give me lots of things to do, hard things. I should love to do them for you."

Lady Turloughmore looked at her very kindly.

"These are early days, my dear child. You will find that I can be very exacting. You are going to take all sorts of things off my hands when Lord Turloughmore comes home."

As she said it a little clap of wind sighed in the chimney and rattled the doors; then subsided as suddenly as it had come.

"Julia is very bad to-night," Lady Turloughmore said, turning to her son. "I don't know when



I have seen her so bad. She keeps talking about the hooker from Galway and the night your grandfather was drowned. She mixes up things and places in the dreadful way she does at those times. ‘The hooker’s ashore off Spanish Point,’ she said, just now when I went in to speak to her, and her eyes had the odd look that always comes to them when her poor head is bad. She is very old, poor Julia.”

“It is a doom to live to be very old,” Lord Erris said; and it was as though the room was suddenly cold; as though some shadow glided by the warm hearth and froze the blood in their veins.

The storm, if there was to be a storm, delayed in coming. There was a calm over the evening that could almost be felt. On her way up to bed, after she had sung through her ballads—she had a small, soft, and tuneful voice, and she sang with such a tender expression as befitted the Irish ballads she chose to sing—Meg opened the hall door, still unbarred, unbolted, and stepped out into the night. The air was milder and there was a magnificent galaxy of stars.

She gazed up at the sky in delight. There was Orion; there were the Plough and the Great Bear. The Milky Way was a road of broken stars across the heavens. She said to herself that the frost

was breaking up. Yet the stars were extraordinarily brilliant, though not with the hard, twinkling brilliancy they had had earlier. Rather it was as though they leant near earth.

She was about to go back again into the house when she was arrested by the strange appearance of the tower. The moon was rising at the side. It hung in the east and a ray had penetrated the tower, giving again an impression of a light within. The illusion was extraordinary.

"Conal M'Garvey is lighting up," said Lord Erris at her elbow. She started to find him there. "If you will brave the winter night to see him light up, at least you had better have something more about your shoulders than that flimsy scarf."

While he spoke he laid a warm wrap carefully about her.

"Come round the other side of the Tower," he said, "it is splendid over the sea on a great night of stars like this."

They went round by the side of the tower and stood on a terrace overlooking the cliffs and the sea. There was a track of shimmering light on the dark water, which reflected, broken up, the millions of stars.

Meg sighed with delight, then turned to him anxiously: she thought he shivered.

"Let us go in," she said; "I am sorry you followed me out here. It is too cold."

In the pale light of the moon she saw his face contract and was sorry for what she had said.

"I am accustomed to taking care of myself," he said. "For my mother's sake I take no risks."

They went back again into the house, where he lit her candle and stood looking after her as she went up the stairs.

They were very kind, she thought, wonderfully kind, as she stood in her comfortable room rosy in firelight and noted the luxury of it. An essentially modern room fitted up and made luxuriously comfortable ages after the house was built. She was not sure that she altogether liked the luxury. She had a love for bareness and space and great stretches of air to breathe in. The many wardrobes, the deep carpet, the pretty lace-hung bed, were for the daughters of the rich, not for Meg Hildebrand, a poor gentleman's daughter.

The windows were carefully closed, blinded, and shuttered. She unfastened the bolts of the shutters and folded them back in their places. She pulled up the blinds and flung wide the windows. The courtyard itself was in gloom, but it framed a square of sea silver in moonlight, and the sound of the sea came to her ears.

She leant out into the cool salt air to catch another glimpse of the firmament full of stars, and had a revelation. The other side of her bedroom wall was the tower, the tower itself. They were close neighbours, she and the grisly secret hidden in the tower.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE DOVE

THE storm broke in the night with a great screaming of wind and roaring of the sea. It whistled and shrieked about Meg's window, tearing loose the blind and sending it streaming and wildly flapping into the room. The wind had come up from the south-east. The courtyard was sheltered. Even so the rain that came with the wind drenched her as she tried to capture the blind and shut the window. She understood now why the long ranges of outside windows were fitted with storm shutters. Castle Eagle sat high in the wind, a-top of the cliffs, open to the Atlantic.

She was almost spent when she succeeded in getting the blind in and the window shut. What a hurly-burly there was outside! She had not known such storms, or she had forgotten them. When she stood in the luxurious room, safely barred and bolted from the storm, the clapping of the wind was so great that she looked through the streaming

rain for the leaping spears of the lightning, but she could see nothing.

She closed the shutters to and stirred her fire, putting on fresh coal. She was not going to sleep through the storm for her heart was troubled for her hosts. What a night for Lord Turloughmore to be on the sea !

Though the room was light and bright she was suddenly seized with fear. What evil web were they spinning, those victims of the cruelty of the Turloughmores long ago before the world had emerged from its days of darkness ? Surely God and not the devil ruled the storm. He said to the winds, " Be still." The winds were the messengers of God, leashed by Him, and ready at His command to come fawning upon Him. Would He remember to-night the need of all creatures on the sea, or was it that He took His own way with the world, recovering to Himself the souls He had lent to the world what way He would ?

She prayed for all those in peril on the sea. In the midst of her prayers there came a knocking at her door.

She got up from her knees and opened it to find old Julia outside, her grey hair about her shoulders, her teeth chattering with cold.

" The hooker's gone on the rocks," she said. " I daren't tell her Ladyship. You didn't see the

foxes for nothing. For the love of God don't tell her about the foxes. Let her be in the hands of God not in the hands of the devil."

"Go back to bed, Julia," Meg said. "It is bitterly cold. You are dreaming. It is fifty years ago since the hooker was lost. I don't believe Lord Turloughmore is at sea to-night. He would see the wind coming and run for shelter."

Julia looked at her in a dazed way.

"I'd be goin' to her Ladyship if I was you. She'll want comfort this sorrowful night," she said. "But for the love of God don't tell her about the foxes. Let her think she's in the hands of God."

"You'll go back to bed?"

"I'll be lightin' up the fire and puttin' the blankets to it to air. They'll be wanted to-night surely, if it's only for the dead. Heard ye ever such a wind, Miss?"

The screaming of the wind had indeed increased. There was an incessant rattling of hail and sand against the windows that made the din almost deafening. Closely shuttered as the room was the carpet was rising in waves under their feet.

"I'll come with you and see you into bed. Be sure the yacht's run for shelter. You must say your prayers. Remember God is stronger than the devil."

"I'm not sayin' He isn't strong an' good. He

has His own ways. He left me widout a husband or child in my owd age : an' He's dealt hard wid the Turloughmores. Haven't they wiped it out ? They're good to the poor. Aren't they famous the country over for their dalin's wid their own people ? If all the gentry was like the Turloughmores there'd be little trouble ! The Lord has dealt hard with them, blessed be His name ! ”

“ Come, I'll see you into bed.”

Meg had been hastily donning some clothing while the old woman talked.

“ You'll go to her Ladyship ? ”

“ When I'm sure you're in bed. Come ! ”

She got Julia to her own room and into bed. The high, unshuttered room was bitterly cold. Having seen her safely into bed she drew the embers of the fire together and put on more coal. She saw to the fastenings of the shutters which had been forgotten. The din of the storm was momentarily growing more terrifying. It was added to by some of the outside shutters which had become loose and were banging about in the gale. The noise deafened her. She had a feeling that if it was to become much greater she could not endure it.

She heaped all the clothes she could find on to Julia's bed. While she did it she was surprised and touched to find her hand caught and kissed by dry old lips.



“There now, you are quite comfortable,” she said. “The storm must soon spend itself.”

“Honey, did ye say ye wor a Hildebran’?” asked Julia, clutching Meg’s sleeve in her eagerness. “Did ye say ye wor a Hildebran’, or did I only dhrame it?”

“I am Margaret Hildebrand. You did not dream it.”

“Then ye must have come for good. A Hildebran’ couldn’t have come for anything but good to this house. Maybe the Lord sees it’s time to give us the luck an’ the blessin’ after the years of affliction.”

“Oh, I hope I am come for good!” cried Meg, fervently, and the tears were in her eyes.

She could not understand why it was that her heart was so warm towards these new friends, already, on such short acquaintance. To be sure, they had taken her to their friendship at once. There was nothing of the cold relationship of employer and employed in the attitude towards her of Lady Turloughmore and Lord Erris. The whole house had seemed to give her a warm welcome. She had been taken into it as a friend. It was something quite different from the Schloss, where the exquisite graciousness of the Archduchess had never for one second involved the faintest approach towards equality. It mattered nothing to the Archduchess

that Meg came of a good old Irish family. She might have been of the bourgeoisie, and, being herself, she would have been lapped about in the same exquisite kindness. From the serene heights of the Archduchess's position all folk below were pretty much the same.

Having left the old woman lying with closed eyes and breathing quietly, Meg went down through the corridors where the feet fell soundless always on a deep carpet, although to-night any lesser sound than the screaming of the wind could hardly be heard. She paused by Lady Turloughmore's door, her head inclined in the act of listening.

While she stood there she began to be aware that other people in the house were about as well as herself. The lights had been turned on in the corridor. She heard the slamming of the door that led to the servants' part of the house. Through the noise she was aware of that feeling which tells that people are awake in the house : that it is no longer a dead house of sleep.

Prince suddenly pushed an insinuating nose into her hand. She turned and saw Lord Erris.

"I was coming to my mother," he said. "She will not sleep through this storm. You had the same kind thought."

With her hair in two straight thick plaits Meg looked oddly different from the Meg of every day.

She had a quaintly serious air, and she looked very young, like a thoughtful child. She stood a little aside to let him knock at the door and blushed because of her slight *déshabille*, which was very slight ; and she was not a self-conscious person. Her white cashmere dressing-gown, trimmed prettily with lace and ribbons, would have passed, with any ordinary man, for the costume of daylight. He noticed the blush and it had a curious effect upon him. Why should any woman, young and beautiful, blush for him, a maimed hulk of a man ? It gave him a curious sensation of half-triumph, half-rage, that she should blush.

The door opened and Lady Turloughmore appeared on the threshold, fully dressed.

“ Ulick ! ” she said, “ I thought I heard voices through this wind. I wasn’t sure. The wind is full of voices.”

“ We met at your door, mother. We both came to see if you wanted anything.”

“ Go back to bed, Ulick, Miss Hildebrand will stay with me, if she will be so kind. There is no sleep possible on such a night. Are the servants about ? ”

“ I think so. You had better ring for some tea.”

He came into the room, rang the bell, and went out again.



“ I have a good son, haven't I ? ” Lady Turloughmore asked, smiling. She was very pale. Her *prie-dieu* by the fire had a Crucifix upon it. Meg felt sure she had been praying.

A dishevelled maid answered the bell and was told to bring tea and some coal. The order was obeyed with an alacrity which told that tea was going in the servants' hall.

“ What an ark this house feels in a storm like this ! ” Lady Turloughmore said, looking about the bright room in lamp-light and fire-light. “ If only the ark might hold all that one loved to-night ! ”

“ The yacht will have run for shelter somewhere. The storm has not come suddenly. There have been abundant warnings.”

“ I am glad you have come to help me through the night. I have prayed myself quiet—but I have felt that the wind must get into my head as it does into Julia's. We can do nothing with her in these winter storms. She seems to go clean off her head.”

“ I know. She has been with me and I have got her safely to bed. I was on my way back to my room when Lord Erris and I met at your door.”

“ You were not coming to me, then ? ”

“ I was, as a matter of fact, listening at the door for any movement that should tell me you were awake.”



“That was kind. I am so grateful to Lady O’Neill for giving me you. It was a thousand chances to one against finding a girl like you. You fit in as I could not have hoped you would. We are a very solitary pair, Ulick and I, when Lord Turloughmore is away. He is restless and is often away, often enough to keep my heart in my mouth. My heart returns for such short periods to its proper position”—she smiled her faint bright smile—“that if I die suddenly I think the verdict will be, ‘Died through misadventure from always having her heart in her mouth.’ ”

Meg did not smile.

“I think superstition is the cruellest thing in the world,” she said. “Faith is to live in the sun. Superstition is to sit in darkness. Dear Lady Turloughmore, why do you, living in the sun, choose to sit in the darkness ? ”

She blushed for her own temerity as she said it, and an apology was on her lips.

“If I could only take strong hold on what you say,” said Lady Turloughmore, apparently finding nothing amiss. “You seem so sure. My dear, I was as brave as you once. But—superstition ! You know the history of the Rosses ? ”

“I know. I am like the scientist who finds cause and effect for everything.”

“You don’t know what it is to see the shadow

of the doom, superstition, whatever you call it, creeping over those you love best. I was as brave as you. I laughed at the doom when I married my husband. I could not know that it is in their blood to accept and believe it. I have come to accept and believe it myself. I wish I had had a houseful of children. They might have banished the shadows of which this house is full. My husband loves it and keeps away from it. My son shuns the society of his kind, being sensitive. We play a part to each other; but each sees through the other. What do you mean by cause and effect?"

"I will tell you a story—an anecdote to explain what I mean. A fortune-teller at a bazaar wickedly and foolishly told a certain Mr. Dick Burke, who is a friend of my people, that he would die within the year of drowning. Well, every one laughed, because Dick Burke is as much at home in the water as on dry land. The wave wasn't made that could drown him, the people used to say. He was brought up beside the sea and learnt to swim when he was a baby. You might as well be trying to drown a Newfoundland dog. Well, it happened he was staying at a French bathing-place. There were dangerous currents in which people were drowned every year. Dick knew all about currents. There were plenty about Loughfinn. He got into a current one day; and finding it rather strong for him, let

himself go with it a bit, never doubting that they would see his plight from the shore and launch a boat. He drifted out. He wasn't at all afraid. He felt that he could keep himself going in the current till the boat came. They were always on the lookout for accidents to bathers there. He could see nothing for the sea shining and sparkling in the sun. The water was very warm. He felt quite comfortable, when, suddenly, as though the sun had gone down behind a great black cloud, the memory came to him of what the fortune-teller had promised him—death by drowning, within the year. Terror seized him. The boat was not coming. He was in the fatal current. He began to struggle. He threw up his hands. Fine swimmer as he was he'd have drowned to a certainty if in the nick of time the boat had not arrived. He is married now, and the father of six children. He is death upon fortune-telling, because it once nearly drowned him."

"I see," Lady Turloughmore said slowly. "You think the doom comes because the doom is expected. Child, if you could make my son think so! I will not speak for his father. He runs into all sorts of dangers. I don't know if he is fleeing from the fear. It is easy to be brave when it is not one's life and heart. For nearly three hundred years not one Lord Turloughmore has died in his bed."



Did she not care for the doom? Meg asked herself the question, wondering. And if she did care, why should she, beyond the common human sympathy? She did not give herself away easily. She loved her father and her own people and all the dear people and creatures about Crane's Nest. In another way she loved the Archduchess and her lovely flock. But she had never been one for foolish and unconsidered friendships. Yet here was she who had not known these Rosses of Turloughmore a week ago, feeling that there was nothing she would not do to fight their phantoms, to lift from them the shadow of doom which so long had lain over them. Was it possible that her world must be dark if the shadow did not lift from theirs?

"With your hair behind your ears like that," said Lady Turloughmore, "you look like the St. George of Donatello."

"I wish I might slay some dragons," Meg answered, shyly yet with a tightening of her lips that made her soft face almost stern.

She had a sudden thought.

"Julia seemed to be comforted," she said, "with the thought that a Hildebrand was come to the house of the Rosses."

"Is the wind lulling?" asked Lady Turloughmore, listening.

The wind had dropped certainly. It had been



dying away since the storm broke, only to renew itself and spring upon the world with a greater fury. In the momentary lull something thudded against the window.

“It is the wild geese,” said Lady Turloughmore, with a loud cry.

Meg ran to the window and opened it, hoping to shut it again before another blast of wind. She hardly heard Lady Turloughmore moaning to herself that the wild geese were crying about the house as they always did for a death.

Everything blew about the room with the opening of the window and the lamp went out. Something had come in, driving against Meg’s breast, into her arms, with a soft thudding force. The fire shot up into a flame as she closed the window again and picked up the thing which lay on the floor, its wings extended. It was a pigeon, beaten and battered by the storm, not dead, but spent.

“See,” she said, drawing down Lady Turloughmore’s hands from before her eyes. “There are no wild geese. It is a dove. The dove has flown into the ark.”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MORNING AFTER

THE morning broke quietly enough after the lulling of the storm. There were signs of it in trees down and slates off and storm-shutters broken. The landscape presented a more desolate appearance than usual, so many gaps in the trees, those remaining bent over by the force of the wind. Everything had a tattered and beaten appearance. But in the little conservatory opening off the octagon room which Lady Turloughmore kept for her private sitting-room, the dove blown in by last night's storm cooed and flashed his irised head and breast in the fleeting sunrays as though no storm had ever been.

The coming of the dove had given her Ladyship great hope and comfort. She could not make enough of the pretty creature which was very tame and allowed itself to be approached and even stroked after a while. She had taken its coming as a sign that all was well with the yacht.

Lord Erris went forth after breakfast to a meet of the hounds. Although the excitement of hunting

was apt to be followed by violent headaches and languor, yet he took these things as in the day's work and did not miss his hunting because of them.

"My son looks well on horseback," Lady Turloughmore said, with a wistful glance at Meg as they watched Lord Erris ride away from the house.

"He looks very well," Meg assented. "Man and horse look as though they were a part of each other."

"That is how a good rider ought to look," said Lady Turloughmore, turning about to enter the house. "I wonder how soon there will be news of the yacht. My husband always remembers that I am anxious and sends me news as often as it is possible. I hope you will see him soon, Miss Hildebrand. That is a picture of him when we were married."

She indicated the portrait of a very handsome young man in uniform which hung above one of the doors in the hall. Through the open hall door a ray of sun shone, slanting upwards on the face of the picture. It was a charming face, looking sideways, a straight nose, a mouth the sweetness of which was not altogether hidden by the moustache, very fine grey eyes under dark brows, the hair parted in the middle, thick and with a waving sweep behind the ears. There was a touch of

wistfulness in the face which did nothing to mar its masculinity.

“He is very handsome,” Meg said, with a sigh of which she was unconscious, because the face was like and unlike Lord Erris’s, being so much more debonair, more full of the joy of youth.

“Many girls would have taken the chances,” Lady Turloughmore said, with an answering sign. “I have never repented my marriage.”

The newspapers and letters had just arrived. Lady Turloughmore selected her letters and, before retiring with them to her own room, remembered something she wanted Meg to do.

“Would you walk over to Carrick?” she asked —“it is about two and a quarter miles from here. The way is quite easy to find, and you can’t mistake the house which stands by itself on a hill. You can see it from the upper windows. Ask for Miss Roche, Miss Anastasia, as the people call her, and say I sent to inquire for her and to hope the house did not suffer in the storm. Carrick is not as strongly built as Castle Eagle. There is sure to be some damage done. Say also, please, that if she will come over for lunch I will drive her back in the afternoon. You can take all the dogs; Anastasia will not mind, and it will be a kindness to them. And please, before you go—will you take my orders to Mrs. Browne for the day. Perhaps you will



kindly write some notes for me in the afternoon. But they can wait."

Meg gave the orders to the housekeeper in her storeroom where she was engaged in measuring out flour and sugar and jam, such things as were needed for the day. From thence she went on upstairs, passing on her way the open door of a bedroom, which she took to be the one making ready for Lord Turloughmore, since a fire was lit and the bed was heaped with linen and blankets ready to be made.

She went on to the end of the corridor, thinking that she would see how Julia was after the disturbance of the night. The old woman was not in the outer room; but she could be heard stirring in the inner room where Meg found her. The inner room still bore traces of the days when it was a nursery. Little beds were pushed into the corners. There was a nursery-paper on the wall which was covered over by such gay pictures as children delight in. There was a big doll's house against the wall, flanked by a rocking-horse. Julia's head was buried in a cupboard where she was doing something or other: she emerged at the sound of Meg's voice.

"I'm just tidying the play-cupboard," she said. "Maybe you'd like a look."

Meg looked and was conscious of the most intense

sadness, enveloping her like a thing that could be felt. The cupboard, a deep and wide one, was full of toys and games in its lower shelves. The upper were heaped with books, the gaily bound books of the nursery.

"I do be tidyin' it out now and again," Julia said, "but never when her Ladyship's about. She bid me give the things away long ago, but I hadn't the heart to do it. Maybe there'd be another child in the place yet. Sure why wouldn't Lord Erris marry?"

"Whose were the dolls and the doll's house and the doll's perambulator?" Meg asked. "Was there a little girl here once?"

"Whisht!" said Julia. "Never let her Ladyship hear you talkin' of her. She'll talk of everything if she likes you except Miss Cicely. If she ever spakes of Miss Cicely to you you'll know you've got at her heart. Miss Cicely died at thirteen years old of the meningitis. I've often thought the light of the house went out with her. She was wild and gay. There do be times I think I hear her laughin' down the passages and see the light of her yellow hair as she flies round a corner before me. Her Ladyship's little maid! I wonder if she knew the desolation she left behind her.

"That is Miss Cicely's picture in her Ladyship's room, with her hair on top of her head tied up with

a blue ribbon and the string of corals about her neck?

“That is Miss Cicely. A painter-gentleman that stayed here one summer painted that picture. 'Tis a likeness, for all that he did be walkin' up an' down the whole time he was paintin' an' puttin' little squeegees of paint on what he called his pallet an' wipin' them off wid a rag. She did be callin' me whin I went up an' down the stairs to see the likeness Mr. Morgan was makin' of her. He had his hands full to keep her quiet, an' whin he got cranky with her she was so pretty in her ways that he found it easier to forgive her than himself.”

Meg went away with the greatest feeling of desolation because anything so beautiful as Cicely had been lost out of the world. She had a moment while Lady Turloughmore was looking out a letter to be answered to glance again at the picture. The soft lifted childish profile, the beauty of colour, the roguish gaiety of the expression; oh, it set her heart to bleed in her breast because so much beauty was dead and gone. There were tears in her eyes when Lady Turloughmore turned and spoke to her where she stood caressing the dove that had flown in last night.

Lady Turloughmore came and put a kind hand on her shoulder, with something of anxiety in her expression.



“ You are not home-sick, my dear, are you ? ” she said, with the sweetest kindness.

Meg’s look reassured her before the words.

“ I have not been home-sick for one second since I came,” she said. “ Yet, it is a malady of mine. I had to leave Austria because of it.”

She had it on her lips to say that the house had folded her in as though she belonged to it in a warm embrace : this house of a shadow that had chilled other people had gathered her like a daughter : but she drove the words back remembering that she was still a stranger.

“ I am glad of that,” Lady Turloughmore said. “ There are not many people, not many girls, who would fit into the life of a house like this. If I had not known Lady O’Neill I confess I should have doubted the wisdom. As it is I have been more than justified, already. I could not have believed it.”

She had a wondering look as she touched Meg’s cheek with her finger.

“ It had to be a friend or nothing,” she said as though to herself, “ and Meg is one in a thousand, one in a thousand.”

Meg went off to execute her errand for Lady Turloughmore, being very glad to get out into the fresh beautiful morning. The dogs had accepted her, and while Prince walked sedately by her side, Mick, the Irish terrier, and Rob, the Highland



terrier, and Playboy, the pug, and half a dozen little dogs rushed ahead and came back to paw her riotously, making the morning joyous with sound. Presently they settled down and were tremendously busy, nosing in the hedges and ditches, hunting after rabbits and small birds, sometimes jumping up on the low walls to see what was to be seen with true canine curiosity. Meg thought them all delightful dogs, so wild and cheerful and friendly, just like the dogs at Crane's Nest, quite unlike the Archduchess's little lap-dog who snapped at every one but his mistress, and the boar-hounds who, to Meg's grief, were kept in cages like so many wild animals when they were not hunting or being led out for walks.

She could see Carrick ahead of her for quite a long way, till she dipped into a hollow full of dead leaves of autumn and lost it. She climbed out of her hollow again, wondering at the desolation of that bit of country, for she had not passed a cottage. Beyond her, closing the long straight road, she saw a pair of entrance gates which were those of Carrick.

She walked very briskly, and was approaching the gates when she heard a shrill barking of dogs at some little distance and the sound of the huntsman's horn. She stopped at a gap in the hedge to look in the direction of the sound, and saw the

hunt streaming like a coloured ribbon down one hill and up another, coming towards her.

The story of Biddy Pendergast, who had brought the misfortune on the Turloughmore family flashed into her mind. She looked down at the dogs, who were showing great excitement. Would the hounds tear them to pieces as they tore the fox in the excitement of the chase?

Calling the dogs to her she ran for the heavy floriated iron gates that were still a considerable way off.

Carrick House stood in a park, surrounded by stone walls, as Irish houses of its kind usually are. There must have been an enormous deal of wall-building in Ireland at one time or another: to be sure there was always granite and always cheap labour; if indeed the walls do not represent the charity which made work in the famine-stricken days rather than a curmudgeon desire on the part of the Irish gentry to exclude themselves from the world.

The gates of Carrick—such gates as in England would hardly belong to a ducal residence, while in Ireland they are to be seen on every hand—were locked. There was a gate lodge inside, but although Meg shook the gate vigorously there was no response from within. The dogs were in a frightful state of excitement by this time. Mick had scampered clean

away. The yelping of the hounds and the shouting of the huntsmen came nearer and nearer. Prince pressed closer to her side looking up at her with his beautiful red-brown eyes with a look that said eloquently that he would lay aside all his prejudices in favour of hunting in order to guard her.

Deliberately she picked up a stone from a heap that lay at hand ready for road-mending and smashed the lock. Just in time. She had hardly got her dogs safely inside when a little red beast went by down the road in a flash, with a string of black and white following. The hounds had no leisure to think of the prisoners beyond the bars who were rushing up and down wildly, seeking for an exit so that they too might hunt. Even Prince had forgotten, and was barking his deepest and hurling himself against the gates in the passion for hunting.

A confused mass of red coats, dark habits and sleek-coated horses pressed on down the road in the direction the fox had taken. One rider detached himself from the mass and came over to where Meg was standing within the gates. It was Lord Erris.

He was looking remarkably well with the unwonted flush in his cheek and light in his eye. It was not easy to realise that he was the sickly young man of everyday life.



“ You are not in distress ? ” he asked, leaning down in his saddle to speak to Meg and smiling at her while his voice was very soft. “ Have those rascally dogs been giving you trouble ? Even Prince may forget his good behaviour on a hunting-day. I generally keep them shut up if the hounds are likely to take this way.”

“ They are quite all right,” she said—“ all except Mick. I’ve lost Mick. I do hope he won’t come to any harm from the hounds.”

“ I shouldn’t bother about Mick,” he said easily. “ Mick often goes away for a day or two and then comes back with a bloody mouth. It’s lucky I haven’t many neighbours for Mick to embroil me with. He’d never do in England. Neither would you, Miss Hildebrand. Have you been breaking Anastasia’s lock ? ”

“ I had to. It was the only way I could get the dogs into safety. How are you to get in if you don’t break the lock ? ”

“ There are plenty of gaps in the wall if you take the trouble to look for them. I acknowledge there isn’t one here. I’ll make one for you if you like, that is if I can induce the mare not to clear the wall. She may not understand that I want her to bring it down. Perhaps on the whole we’d better ask Anastasia to give employment to some one by breaking down the wall, so that people who think



to enter by the gate need not break the law with the padlock."

Was it possible this was the man of a few hours ago? His voice was slow as he jested, and his lips and eyes humorous. It seemed to lift the situation and her heart amazingly.

"You had better go on," she said, "or you will lose a day's hunting. And I shall be late with my message to Miss Roche, which includes an invitation to lunch."

He looked as though he would have liked to stay; but he thought better of it.

"Well, good-bye, Miss Hildebrand," he said cheerfully, turning the chestnut mare about. "I wish you were hunting too. It is a glorious morning. Give my love to Miss Roche and look after my mother."

Meg, unconscious that she was still holding the broken padlock in her hand, went up the long drive that wound like a ribbon through the park, between its stunted thorn-trees, past its few grazing cattle. The dogs followed her, sedately enough now, whining to themselves now and again as they mused darkly on the lost delights of the hunt.

The drive climbed a hill. It ended at a long low gate that had once been white. Beyond it was a tangled lawn. Beyond the overgrowth a house built in the classical manner, with fluted pillars and

porticoes like a temple, revealed itself. The windows were blank. The place had a neglected, uncared-for look.

The gate was open and hung loose on its hinges ; she had to lift it in order to open it. She was used to such things at Crane's Nest or she might not have understood how to do it. The grass had grown up through the gravel of the path, and it was not easy to see where that began and what had once been flower-beds ended. A gossamer hung over the bushes of bay and Portugal laurels. Looking before her to the house, which had been a warm cream-colour, and yet bore traces of gilding in the pilasters, plainly a house of great pretensions in its time, she saw how some of the stucco headings to the pilasters had fallen away ; how the hall-door was blistered with the sun of many summers and the walls streaked with the tears of many winters, the green tears of rain.

A curiously depressing place. She was very glad of the comfortable society of the dogs. Turning about on the doorstep she saw that Mick had come back. A feather or two clung to his shining black nose. Apparently his quarry had been the domestic fowl.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PORTRAIT

MEG knocked and rang. She turned about and surveyed the very fine prospect that lay below the house-front of Carrick ; turned back to survey the wide double doors set in a glass screen of elaborate device. Above it was a beautiful fanlight with the figure of a horse inside it. Every house of a certain period in Ireland boasts a fanlight and a horse, with a glass screen either side the doors.

Not a sound came in answer to her knocking. She had plenty of time to note the architectural beauty of the house, to come to the conclusion that if it was new-painted and kept in order it would be a beautiful house : the deep eighteenth-century windows headed with an arch suggested quiet rich rooms beyond, with brass basket grates and books behind lattices of brass, with doors and mantels of old Spanish mahogany.

Now, one or two broken panes gave the lost note of dreary desolation to the house. She knocked and rang again. She heard the bell jangle down the

empty passages ; but no one came. She began to feel it eerie, and was more grateful than ever for the company of the dogs.

At last she made up her mind that if she was going to gain admittance she would have to find another way than by the hall door.

She tried getting round the house and was stopped by what seemed the wall of a garden, with a postern gate in it, all overhung with a thick tangle of bushes, through which she could see something white gleaming forlornly. It might have been a statue, some Aphrodite or Flora, the grass and weeds swathing her to the breasts. On the other hand it might be a grave-stone. The walls looked uncommonly like graveyard walls. Was it possible there could be a graveyard crowding up so closely to the walls of the house ? It might be so : she had known it so before when a house had been built on the site of some ancient Abbey. Where she stood by the gate it was dark. Overhead were cedars and planes and cypresses that darkened the day. She had a sudden memory, standing there looking through the postern and the tangle, of an illustration to " Bleak House," a book she had loved and disliked, of Jo looking through the postern into Tom All Alone's.

She went on with a creepy feeling round the lichened and damp-stained walls. It might be only a garden within the walls, an orchard, in the



winter sadness, but with life, beauty, fruitfulness on their way. It might. To her it had a graveyard face.

At the back of the house she came upon the great ranges of outbuildings common in Ireland, where millions have been spent on walls and buildings for which people have no use any longer. Fifty horses might have been stabled in the great rows of stabling. There was lodging for an army of grooms and stable-helpers. Now all yawned lifeless and dark. The upper half-doors of the stables swung by a hinge. The windows in the harness rooms were broken. The grass was everywhere and craved wary walking, since tons of old iron lay about which had once been the newest stable-fittings, garden implements, machinery, all exposed to the wind and the weather till they were beyond usefulness.

She made her way through an opening into an inner courtyard. Fowl were clucking about in it, ducks were quacking; a spotless flock of geese, looking amazingly well-kept amid the wildness and desolation, hissed at her and fled before the dogs.

Rows of unshuttered, closed windows looked down from the house on the enclosed yard. Her eye noted the tap which had been used for washing carriages. Going on it observed a very ancient carriage partly drawn out of its house and obviously used as a roosting-place by the hens.

Again she was glad to have the dogs. The fowls were not uncheerful company ; but she did not like the empty outbuildings, the rows and rows of dark windows looking down upon her.

Suddenly she discovered that there was some one besides herself in the yard, something human, an old woman, to judge by the huddled-up figure, swathed in miserable rags of clothing ; the face was invisible, for the woman was bending over a pot, apparently mixing a mess of oatmeal and greens for the fowl.

Before Meg could approach she lifted her head and began ladling out the stuff, calling the fowl in a high discordant voice. Meg stood just beyond the circle of fowl, all busy over the feast and enjoying it with a prodigious amount of noise. She felt it hopeless to attempt to make herself heard while the din lasted.

Apparently the woman had not seen her. Having emptied the pot she picked it up and made for the door leading into the kitchen part of the house.

Meg followed her, overtaking her just as she was about to close the door.

“ If you please,” she began.

“ No ; I haven’t any eggs to sell. Not yet. The hard winter has put the hens off laying, and Deegan in the village gives me tuppence for every egg I can give him. A wicked price, isn’t it ? It would be

eating money. Eh, what did you say? You don't want eggs. What do you want? Come in, or those impudent divils of hens will be into the house. There's not a crumb goes to waste for them. You wouldn't want to be sweeping the floor with them about. Leave your dogs outside. I've a sick dog inside that won't like to see them."

She closed and latched the door upon the dogs. They were in a damp-smelling, narrow passage, ill-lit. Meg felt the chill of the flagged flooring under her feet as she followed the shapeless bundle of rags along the passage.

She expected to be led into one of the kitchens; but her guide, as though she did not need to ask Meg's business, since it was not to buy eggs, went on past door after door, revealing a yawning and vault-cold emptiness beyond, till she came to a stairfoot. She went up, Meg following her. By a door at the head of the stairs she emerged into what looked like a back-hall—double doors of mahogany, with a great fanlight above, closing it in.

"Well, now, your business," said the bundle of rags. "Are you the young woman from the Department about the Plymouth Rocks? You can tell them that I prefer to go on as I am. I like my own hens best, and we've been a long time together."

"No; I'm not the young woman from the Department," Meg said. She had lost her sense of



eeriness with the discovery of a fellow-creature. "I came to see Miss Roche. Can I see her, please? I knocked and rang for a long time at the hall-door; but no one heard me. I've a message from Lady Turloughmore to Miss Roche."

"I won't do, I suppose."

"Lady Turloughmore said I was to see Miss Roche if she was at home, and to bring her back to lunch with me. Lady Turloughmore hoped no damage was done by the storm."

"Sure if the place was to tumble all in a heap it wouldn't matter," said the bundle of rags. She stood with her back to the high arched window. She had a sort of hood over her head which kept her face in shadow, but a small, darkly pale face revealed itself, lit by a pair of oddly bright eyes under cloudy hair, the colour of which hid itself in the shadow.

"If you want to see Miss Roche," she said, "you'd better come to the drawing-room. There's no fire there, but maybe you wouldn't like the morning-room because of the dog. He was a grand dog in his day, poor old Rattler. He's the very last of the Kennels. 'Tis a pity when any one, human or beast, outlives their time."

She opened the door as she spoke, revealing a very fine hall, with frescoed walls and carving. The hall was crowded with furniture, old and good:



a Chinese lacquer clock with a cabinet to match caught Meg's admiring eye. There were trophies of arms on the walls between the Cupids and musical instruments of the stucco work. A high pierced brass fender stood in front of a grate, the steel bars of which were red with rust. There was a picture of a young man in a velvet coat, which might have been a Romney, above the fireplace. There was dust and disorder over everything, and an all-pervading smell of damp. A beautiful Jacobean chair stood by the fireplace: it was filled with frowsy cushions: the light came dimly through the fanlight and the screens of the hall-door over which spiders had spun their webs. Meg had an impression that the floor covering, whatever it might be, slid under her feet as though it were rotten.

The old woman opened a door at the side of the hall, sunk deep under a cornice and pediments, carved and gilt. The room into which they went had a suddenness of light and space after the darkness outside. A long stately room lit by six long narrow windows, originally decorated in white and gold, it kept much of its ancient beauty. It had perhaps been decorated and furnished later than the rest of the house, for there was an Early Victorian suggestion about the furniture. A series of enormous gilt mirrors went round the walls, adding to the light and space. There was a grand piano. The carpets

had wreaths of roses upon a pale blue ground. The chandeliers showed a myriad glass drops. There were gilt girandoles for candles on the walls. Heavy Victorian chairs and sofas were mixed up with delicate little Sheraton and French tables. There was Berlin wool-work in the chairs and cushions, and the banner screen by the fireplace. All the windows had their heavy drapery of crimson damask with broad bands of gold galon.

Despite the period, or the mixture of periods, the room had an imposing dignity, even beauty, of its own. The gilt consol-tables, the Early Victorian marble-topped cabinets, the tables, overflowed with beautiful objects in china and silver and ivory and enamel.

Having ushered Meg into the drawing-room the old woman withdrew, saying something which Meg understood to be that she would let Miss Roche know.

Plainly the room did not share in the neglect that had fallen on the rest of the house. There was plenty to occupy any one who waited there. Meg hardly gave a glance at the china and other curios. She was attracted by a couple of pictures either side the fireplace, oval portraits of a youth and a girl.

The girl's hung immediately above a harp which stood lonely, with only one or two strings remaining

—obviously the harp the girl in the picture played, which there had all its strings.

She was in white satin. She had the long throat, the oval face, the delicate tapering hands of the Book of Beauty. There was a lace fichu drawn about the drooping shoulders, held by a rose. There was a rose in the knot of dark ringlets lifted, and then allowed to droop either side the face, just revealing the little ears. A goddess-like creature to look back at from the strenuous days of twentieth-century womanhood. Such a creature must always be clad in satins and have milk-white fingers and show a lovely arm under falling frills of fine lace while she swept the strings of a gilded harp.

Meg's eye went on to the portrait of the young man, plainly the girl's brother. He was in a soldier's dress with a high military stock, bushy dark hair, a little whisker carefully trained either side his handsome, richly coloured face.

She glanced at the young man, and went back to the scrutiny of the girl's portrait. It made her sorrowful. In this room the girl had danced, and played, and worked in Berlin wool and painted niggling water-colours, all the blameless occupations of the Early Victorian age. The youth might have been killed in one of the wars with the Afghans, perhaps in the Crimea. The girl—Meg wondered



what had become of the girl. She was so charming that she must have had many lovers.

Meg was still looking up at the beautiful face of the girl in the picture when the old woman came to her side. She started at the sound of the voice at her ear, and turned about in some amazement. The rags had disappeared. Before her she saw a little old lady rather mad, or maddish-looking. The ivory face was scored by innumerable fine lines, which were so plainly visible through the heavy lace veil as to make it evident that the face had not been sufficiently washed. The eyes were singularly bright. The little old lady was wearing a very wide feathered hat, tied up, so to speak, with the big lace veil. She wore a dress frilled to the waist of black and white striped silk. She had a black lace scarf about her shoulders, and where it was caught a pink monthly rose nestled. Belled sleeves fell over white gloves of one button length. A parasol, with a folding handle, was held under one arm. So might elegance have gone to a garden party in the days of Napoleon the Little.

“I have left old Rattler quite comfortable,” she said. “He will take no harm till I come back at four to give him his beef-tea. I couldn’t leave him if he fretted. He doesn’t fret. He’s sleeping his life away. Any time at all I shall come and find him dead and stiff. He shouldn’t have lived to be so



old by rights. He was the best hound the Muskerrys ever had."

Meg looked at her in amazement.

"You are—Miss Roche?" she said.

"Anastasia Roche, at your service. I could see you thought I was an old hen-wife. No wonder—I do my own chores as they say in America. I'd half a mind to get some fun out of you by talking about myself in the character of the hen-wife, but it wouldn't be fair. What use have I for a servant, and I as poor as a church-mouse? Now, if you're ready——"

Meg stood staring at the old lady. She tried to say that she should have recognised Miss Roche for a lady by her speech.

"I don't blame you, I don't blame you at all," said Miss Anastasia. "I wonder what the men who used to dance with me, who were in love with me—a lot of ghosts now—would think if they could see me feeding the hens and doing my own chores. Anybody at all about here would tell you I'm a bit gone in the upper storey, especially when there's a high wind. Maybe I'm not as mad as they think me."

Even yet Meg was not altogether enlightened.

"Who is that lovely girl?" she asked, looking up at the picture. "She is so beautiful that I can scarcely withdraw my eyes from her. And the

young man. They are brother and sister, I suppose, by their looks."

"They are so," said Miss Roche, with emphasis. "Poor Vincent. He was killed in the Mutiny. The girl's me. What, didn't you know? Some people see a likeness even yet."

## CHAPTER IX

### EXORCISM

MEG was to become much better acquainted with Miss Roche and to reconsider her first verdict as to the lady's madness.

The day went out, calm and quiet.

"To-morrow we may look for the yacht," said Lady Turloughmore as she went up to bed in the evening, carrying the dove on her outstretched palm. Plainly the creature was a pet. It's bright, fearless gaze told that it had never regarded man as an enemy or anything but a friend.

"God help her Ladyship," said Kate, who had constituted herself lady's maid to Meg in addition to her other duties. "God help her, she's takin' great comfort out of the little bird. She'll need all the comfort she can get, or my name's not Kate Maguire."

Meg, who had been taking comfort herself, felt almost angry with what she feared must follow.

"You mustn't be superstitious, Kate," she said

“ Why shouldn’t Lord Turloughmore be perfectly safe ? It isn’t likely he, an experienced yachtsman, would put out in the teeth of the gale.”

“ If he had to he’d do it,” said Kate, obstinately. “ ’Tisn’t for the Turloughmores to pick and choose when their time comes. If you knew as much about the family as I know, you’d know that every wan o’ them died through the foolish sort of an accident. It always was so an’ it always will be so. Moreover, wasn’t the yacht runnin’ into the storm ? The fishermen do be sayin’ she would be off Mount’s Bay when the storm struck her ; an’ that’s as cruel a coast as there is in the Three Kingdoms. ’Tis foundered on the Manacles she’ll be, an’ the news comin’ fast to the poor mistress.”

Something in Meg’s heart cried out in acute protest against the cruelty of this superstition. The calm acceptance of the inevitable in Kate’s manner oppressed her with a weight of fear and terror.

“ I can’t understand it,” she said helplessly. “ Here are all you people believing in God and serving Him. Yet you believe that an old curse can go on blighting the lives of innocent people, centuries after the wrong-doing is over. I can’t understand it. Are not the Turloughmores good ? ”

“ None better,” assented Kate, a little sullenly. “ There isn’t a better family in Ireland to their own



people an' the poor. But isn't it in the Bible, ' The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children ' ? You can't get beyond that, Miss."

" That refers to a natural law, not to the Will and the Mercy of God."

" My grandfather was a Presbyterian an' was great on the Bible," said Kate. " I suppose it's in my bones to believe it. Besides"—her glance at Margaret was furtive—" they say the foxes was seen. I didn't see them myself, but there were them that did."

" Because they were driven in by the hard weather and starvation," said Meg, hotly ; but her voice shook though she tried to speak with conviction. " You know the frost was the hardest for fifty years. The foxes were in search of food."

" You seen them, Miss ? "

Meg was taken aback. For a second she hesitated.

" No, no," she said. " I was only explaining their appearance, if they were seen."

Where she sat facing the glass, while Kate brushed her long hair, handling it as though she loved it, she could see the stubborn disbelief in the girl's face, and it made her angry because she was frightened.

" You call yourselves Christians," she said. " If I believed so little in the power and goodness of

God as to accept all those superstitions, I should call myself a devil-worshipper."

"God forgive you, Miss," said Kate. "Doesn't the best blood in Ireland—ay, an' the best-livin' people, believe in it? It isn't exactly the work of the divil ayther. 'Tis some power that lies between them that's nayther God nor divil."

Kate finished plaiting the thick silky hair. There was nothing more she could do, so, after moving about the room for a little while, doing perfectly unnecessary things while sending anxious and propitiatory glances towards Meg's back, she went away sighing, but not at all shaken in her beliefs.

Next day passed without any news of the yacht. It would be lying up somewhere becalmed, said Lady Turloughmore, and took to starting at every sound in the house and looking round with the expectancy fading away to a dreadful disappointment every time the door was opened.

Lord Erris was laid up with one of his recurring headaches, and kept his room till evening. The stillness as the afternoon wore on became oppressive. It seemed to brood upon the earth, lying down on it like a weight. The air, breathing, not blowing, from the west, was as warm as though it blew from a great fire. Not a leaf moved. The corridors of Castle Eagle, which usually were full of the wind, had a stillness in them disconcerting after the noises.

The sky was colourless, a dark grey, except where beyond the mountains it was suffused with a stormy yellow.

Kate brought the hot water to Meg's bedroom and laid out her dinner dress on the bed. There was no question of choice, for she had only one, made of a thin brown stuff that harmonised exceedingly well with her hair and complexion. She had said to herself when she put it on the first evening that really her eyes were the colour of Prince's, liver-colour—she could get no nearer to it than the ugly comparison.

On this evening, beside the dress Kate had laid a bunch of brown pansies. Her look at Meg said that they were a peace-offering.

"My uncle's the gardener at Major Sewell's, Miss," she said. "He does be givin' me a bunch of posies between-whiles. As often as not 'tis to the altar they go. The likes o' me wouldn't be wantin' flowers to wear."

"Oh, Kate, they are lovely! But are you sure these ought not to go to the altar? Why should a mortal woman have them——?"

"Whisht now, Miss, the Lord gave them to be enjoyed. They'll look lovely wid your dress. His Lordship'll be paintin' you wid them agin the white of your breast. It does him, and her Ladyship too, good to have you in the house. You sang



‘ Silent, O Moyle ’ lovely last night. We was all at the head o’ the stairs listenin’ to ye. ’Tis glad I am you’re not vexed wid me any longer. I was very bould and impident last night an’ your back showed it. You were terrible proud.”

Meg coloured. She was of those who colour easily, like Browning’s “ Last Duchess.” Any beauty, any kindness, any delight—they need not be very great—sufficed to bring the colour to her cheek.

“ I’m so sorry my back was proud,” she said.

“ Never mind, Miss ; it isn’t proud now. You’re soft and shy now and you’re lovely.”

Kate helped her to dress with an assiduous zeal that was almost tender. She insisted on doing many things which Meg was accustomed to do for herself, and Meg accepted them, knowing that they betokened Kate’s repentance for the little breeze of last night.

“ How still it is ! ” she said, leaning from the open window. “ I cannot even hear the sea.”

“ My father does be sayin’ that it is a bad sign when it’s so quiet as all that. Come in, Miss, or ye’ll be gettin’ yer death o’ could, an’ you wid a bare neck.”

Lord Erris was at dinner, looking tired and dispirited. It could hardly be otherwise, seeing



how his mother listened through all the conversation for the messenger that delayed. To see her turn over the letters when they came in with a tense expectancy, changing as she did not find the one she wanted to a dejection dreadfully apparent, was against all cheerfulness.

Meg went through the oppressed meal not knowing what she ate or drank, making despairing efforts to keep up the semblance of conversation and receiving so little help from the others that she gradually relapsed into shy silence. She had a great deal of natural shyness—it was one of her peculiar charms, the sudden shyness that looked and looked away again. Now while she tried to make conversation the futility of it was borne in upon her. Was she not torturing them by her well-meant trivialities? At the thought, she was suddenly shy and coloured as she relapsed into silence, looking down at her plate.

Lady Turloughmore had put too great a strain upon her own endurance, for she suddenly stood up, and asking in a stifled voice to be excused, she went away, leaving the others at table.

Meg looked up at the young man with an appealing glance, and her eyes were full of tears.

“It is too dreadful,” she said, half under her breath.

Lord Erris, with the closing of the door, had laid

down his knife and fork and rested his forehead in his hand. His face in shadow was very pale. He lifted his head to answer her.

“It is dreadful,” he said; “but you must bear with us, till our suspense is relieved. I assure you we can be really merry at times. You should hear my mother’s laughter. It is irresistible. It is very sad when the time comes that she cannot laugh.”

“To-morrow or next day she will laugh again,” said Meg. “I do so want to hear her. I know by her face how she could laugh.”

Phelim, the old butler, came in and removed the cloth from the long polished table before setting out the fruit. It was an old-fashioned custom still adhered to at Castle Eagle.

The fire burned brightly on the hearth. It was a charming interior. The stately beautiful room, the shaded candles, the shining silver and glass, the colours of the fruit and wine against the rich darkness of the wood; the beautiful girl and the young man sitting facing each other, while the silver-haired servant moved about quietly.

If some one had made a picture of it he would hardly, unless his feeling was for the macabre, see a skeleton by the hearth. Yet there was one there. Grim tragedy waited for them in the firelit room. The dogs lying on the rug before the fireplace were

aware of it and sighed disconsolately. Meg toyed with her fruit, feeling that she could not have swallowed a morsel. Lord Erris lifted his glass of wine and put it away untasted.

“Will you sing for me?” he asked, standing up and going towards the door.

“If you wish,” she replied, with a startled air. She had a momentary feeling as though she had been asked to sing while a dead man lay in the house. She put away the grue from her determinedly. She simply would not believe in the hereditary doom. As she preceded Lord Erris into the drawing-room—she was always glad to precede him so that she should not seem aware of his dragging gait—it came to her that if one person in that house refused to believe the superstition it might be set at naught.

He stood by the hearth watching her while she sang. After a while he came and turned the leaves of her music. She sang for him what he asked her, with a catching of her breath like a sob now and again because of the trouble in the house. Her voice had a soft sadness always. The great charm of her singing was in its expression. She sang Gounod’s “Ave Maria,” feeling as though she pleaded for help for the poor woman upstairs. Her voice was full of tears and her eyes. With the last bar she let her hands lie on the keys. She had



beautiful hands, tapering imaginative fingers yet wide palms, beneficent hands, not too white but warmly coloured, showing dimples where other hands show bones. Lord Erris had a thought that they would be good hands to rest on a man's head in forgiveness and benediction, to tend a child.

"I suppose I ought not to go to her," she said, looking back at him, with what he called a divine pity in his thoughts.

"Better not. She has her own way of finding comfort—on her knees. It is a comfort I envy you women."

She left the piano and stood by the hearth. Her eyes fell shyly before his and lifted again.

"There will be good news to-morrow," she said.

"Possibly. It will be only a postponement at best, with our history. Why did you come? It is an unhappy house."

Again her eyes fell and were lifted to his.

"I don't believe there is any doom," she said. "The terrible thing to me is that you should go on believing it."

"History is against you," he said grimly. Then, with a change of countenance—

"We are not always discussing such unpleasant subjects, I assure you, Miss Hildebrand. Usually we are too—shall I say, civilised—to encourage the



family skeleton to walk. You might have been here for a long time, for months, and found us quite cheerful normal people. It is the misfortune of your coming at a moment when the yacht is overdue, or may be overdue. My poor mother is unnecessarily anxious. I dare say there will be news to-morrow."

The wind sprang up as though to answer him, shook all the windows, cried in the chimney, whistled in the key-hole, and dropped as though it had never been.

"Another Atlantic cyclone approaching," he said quietly ; " it has been a winter of storms."

She looked at him again, wondering if she could follow him or ought to follow him in the lightness of his tone ; but there was no lightness in his sombre face.

" I will tell you a story," she said ; and the colour rushed over her face and neck as she said it. Her eyes were down, or she might have been perturbed by the expression in his as they watched her. " It is about an experience of mine ; and the application of it is so presumptuous that I should not dare to apply it."

" Yes ; go on," he said, turning away and dropping into a chair, where he sat staring into the fire.

" It is only of one time when some people who

were staying at a house in Paris where I was visiting a school-fellow were practising what they called White Magic. I was only a school-girl at the time. They were poets, writers, artists, philosophers—all manner of things interesting—Madame Desanges, Claire's mother, had a famous salon. Some one had discovered I was likely to make a medium. They got me to a seance rather against my will. Even then I thought it all folly, and a bad folly, for it was playing with the supernatural if it was not worse. I had the oddest feeling as I sat in the dark room among those people, something like a wind in my hair, on my face, all about me, that I must resist, lest something should take possession of me and I no longer have control of myself. I said in my heart : ' I belong to the good God : if I cease to belong to Him for one instant I do not know what may befall me. I will not.' Presently a young poet at the table fell into a sort of convulsion. It was horrible to hear his struggles in the dark. He spoke—or something spoke in him. ' There is one here resisting us. Send her away.' I was very glad to confess and be banished. I was never required again as a medium."

" I am glad you resisted," he said quietly ; " and—the application ? "

She looked at him imploringly. Would he not see it ? Suddenly he looked up at her. Then

leaning forward he took a fold of her skirt and kissed it.

“ You should never have come here,” he said, “ for your own sake. I hope we will not drive you away with our evil spirits, for yours are all good, good enough to banish ours, to exorcise them.”

## CHAPTER X

### THE RETURN

THE next day did not bring good news, nor the next, nor the next. They had ascertained that Lord Turloughmore had sailed with his yacht from Falmouth on the day before the big storm. There had been successive storms after that ; the stormiest February the old people ever remembered. Days grew into weeks and there was no news of the yacht.

At first it was hoped that she might have been only blown out of her course and that there would be news of her presently. After a time hope changed to fear, fear to certainty. Paragraphs began to appear in the newspapers about the disappearance of the yacht. The unfortunate fate which attached to the family was recalled. It was accepted that the vessel had gone down with all hands.

The deepest gloom lay upon Castle Eagle. Lady Turloughmore took her grief in a heart-breaking way. She neither ate nor slept unless under the



influence of drugs. She turned away from all consolation.

“ My husband has gone the way of his fathers,” she said. “ My son will follow him. He is right when he says that no woman through him shall suffer as his mother has suffered. Better let the Rosses of Turloughmore disappear and some happier people take their place.”

It was a dark morning of early March when Meg awoke in the very darkness of morning to a noise somewhere close at hand. Something had fallen with a tremendous crash. The noise went on after she had awakened, or she would have thought it a nightmare. It sounded as though something enormously heavy were being dragged over a stone floor. She sat up in bed, only half-awake, listening, and suddenly the sound ceased.

She dozed off again. In the morning she remembered the noise. She remembered that some trees near the house, which had been in a dangerous state since the storm, were to be felled that day. Perhaps they had begun the work in the dark of the morning. Anyhow when she went to look later in the day the trees were gone, so she thought no more about the matter.

That day Kate whispered to her that a dead sailor had come into the bay, flung upon the sands. The poor body, headless, had been buried hastily.

Only a few rags of clothing remained on it. Impossible to say if he belonged to the yacht, although Kate shook her head gloomily and said that they were beginning to come home. Some of the men on the yacht had belonged to the fishing village. It was no use telling her Ladyship the horror. God help her, she had enough to bear.

The first day that Lady Turloughmore got up and dressed herself in black was terrible for all of them. They were six weeks now without news of the yacht; and following the dead sailor some wreckage had come in. It might or might not be from the yacht; but the morning after it had come in Lady Turloughmore dressed herself in black.

Wearing her black dress she made her appearance in the room where Julia sat darning the house linen; and the old woman screamed—

“Go an’ take it off o’ you,” she said. “He’s not dead—I tell you he’s not dead. Wouldn’t I feel it in my breast if he was dead, the child I nursed? The hooker’s only held back by the storm an’ he’ll be comin’ home from school an’ right glad to be home. Why would ye be sendin’ him to them English schools, the one son ye have? Couldn’t ye have his schoolin’ done in the house?”

Lady Turloughmore stared at her as though she was frightened and then burst into tears, the first tears she had shed. Meg, following her hastily into

what had been the nurseries, was just in time to lead her away, holding her hands, while the old woman muttered that the hooker might come any hour and her darling child would be wanting his warm clothes, for the hooker was very apt to be swept by seas in the stormy weather.

“Her mind has gone back to the time my husband was a boy,” said Lady Turloughmore, trembling and sobbing. “She confuses me with the Dowager, as she often does.”

That day Meg heard another piece of news. The fox which had so long eluded the hounds—the old vixen with the white star on her breast had had her last run.

“She must have been incredibly old,” said Miss Roche, who brought the news. “Many a glorious run she gave us. She’s had her last run. The peasants are saying that the luck of the family will change now that the witch is at rest. It’s time for it. I don’t believe myself the creature was anything but an old fox.”

Meg looked at her doubtfully.

“Did you ever hear,” she asked, hesitatingly, “of foxes coming in in very cold weather to look for food?”

“They might, if there were henroosts about,” said Miss Roche. “You haven’t been seeing the foxes?”



Meg confessed, helpless before the little bright eyes.

“ Ah, that’s bad,” Miss Roche said. “ I wouldn’t be saying there was anything in it and yet I wouldn’t be saying there wasn’t anything in it.”

“ They were real live foxes. I am sure of that. I saw the big old fox with the star on her breast. She was baying the house. But some of the others were doing just what you’d expect any animal to do. One was scratching his ear with his foot like a dog.”

“ You wouldn’t deny the creatures fleas, nor to use their best endeavours to get rid of them. No one ever said they weren’t real foxes. If the wild geese had come it would have been proof positive to some people’s minds. It wouldn’t to mine. The old Lord Turloughmore had a way with creatures. He even tamed the wild geese. He had a flock of them in the park. They flew away after his death and never came back. Why wouldn’t they tell their children or grandchildren about the fine warm welcome there was for them and the friends they’d found at Castle Eagle? That is if they had come back. No one saw or heard the wild geese.”

“ There was only the dove,” said Meg.

“ I should be afraid of the creature getting hurt with the cats and dogs,” said Miss Roche.

“ The dogs are afraid of the dove, oddly enough.



It pecks at them if they intrude ; the cats never come upstairs."

" For an Irishwoman I'm without superstition," said Miss Roche. " Foxes, wild geese, dove : why wouldn't it be all natural ? All the same I wish there weren't the signs and portents. They add to the terror. Why wouldn't Hugh be on an island somewhere ? "

Miss Roche, coming backwards and forwards to the house of mourning brought something sane and cheerful with her. It was she who lifted Lady Turloughmore out of her apathy.

" You're killing yourself, Shelagh," she said, " and as for that poor boy of yours, he suffers more every day. You must brace yourself up, my woman : and as a first step to it I'm going to take you away."

Lady Turloughmore protested, but protested in vain. Miss Roche showed the stuff she was made of. Castle Eagle was in a bustle of preparation for departure. They were going to Switzerland. There had been a question of the Riviera, but Miss Roche had brushed the suggestion aside. Not the sea. They had all had enough of the sea.

" 'Tis too lonesome we are," she said, " and it upsets our nerves so that we see visions and dream dreams. If I were you, Ulick, I'd leave Castle Eagle to the rats and mice for a bit and take a house near

Dublin. Maybe we'd be all more sensible if we saw more of our fellow-creatures."

A spasm crossed Lord Erris's face at the suggestion. He was Lord Erris still. Many and many a day would pass before he would ask leave to presume his father's death and take the title.

"I am very well content at Castle Eagle," he answered.

"You creature!" Miss Roche said, with a curious tenderness. "Sure I'm taking you out of it for your good."

The Dowager Lady Turloughmore was coming to take charge at Castle Eagle. Meg was to have a holiday after seeing her installed. The Dowager had been laid up with bronchitis all the winter and had made less of an effort to recover than usual, having had a great shock in the disappearance of her son. She did not arrive for a few days after the others had departed, having waited to see them in Dublin: so Meg had two days alone except for the dogs.

It was beautiful April weather and she was able to be out-of-doors all day. The second day there was her packing to see to and preparations to be made for the visitors. Prince followed her about anxiously, as though he knew she was going. It troubled her to leave the dog even for a few weeks; she kept telling him over and over again that she was coming

back, that they were all coming back, that he must guard the house, while the dog looked at her with a wistful intensity in his beautiful eyes.

When she went up to bed the first night he followed her. He had been used to sleep in Lord Erris's room. Now he followed her into her room and lay down beside her bed. She had always the sense about Prince that his favour distinguished the few to whom it was granted. She had a warm sense of comfort and companionship in his presence.

The household had embarked on a tremendous spring-cleaning between the departure of the travellers and the arrival of the Dowager. Windows were open everywhere; there was a bright clear light, a fresh April air that might well blow away all the shadows from Castle Eagle. It came to the last day. Everything was in order, clean and sweet. There were wall-flowers and narcissi in all the rooms; clean curtains up at the windows; everything had been scrubbed and polished and furbished and the whole house smelt of cleanliness.

The Dowager arrived about five o'clock, with her maid. She wept a little on arrival, but perhaps she had come to an age when one does not weep much, realising that death is only postponed, never prevented, and that one is nearing the end of partings.



Presently, after she had had a cup of tea and rested, she was going round the gardens, leaning on Meg's arm, her other hand helping her progress by means of an ebony cane.

She had taken a great fancy to Meg, having heard good reports of her from Lady Turloughmore.

"I can never thank you enough, my dear," she said, looking at Meg out of her kind, faded old eyes. "Poor Shelagh has had so much to bear. If she had had her little daughter now what a comfort it would have been! She said that nothing could exceed your sweetness with her. How few girls could be what you have been!"

After the progress round the garden she was tired and sat down on a seat in the sun, while the flowers smelt in the heat and a myriad bees buzzed in and out the flower-buds.

"Poor Ulick," she said, "I wish he would marry. He dreads afflicting any woman with his ill-health and his family sorrows. I wish we could persuade him to see a specialist about his poor foot. One is shorter than the other, you know. They tortured him in childhood with their stupid methods—burnt him at one time, froze him at another till he got rheumatism into his very bones. He was so patient always. Shelagh said it broke her heart to see his patience."



She looked up with a sudden briskness.

"I got a curious idea, my dear," she said, "that Ulick's patience was breaking up when I saw him in Dublin. I don't know what has been happening to him. There was a change. I wonder his mother did not see it. I think if he were stronger, freer from pain, he would be better able to fight shadows, to fight shadows."

Meg looked at her eagerly, colouring after her fashion. So she had not been wrong in thinking that the face, despite its weariness of age, had an unusual spirit and courage. She felt as though she had obtained an unexpected ally.

"Yes, that is it," she said. "There are too many shadows in this house."

"You are not afraid of them?" the old lady asked, looking at her with an odd intentness, then looking away.

"I am not afraid."

"My dear," the Dowager went on in quite a different voice, "I want you to tell me about your father. I knew him when he was a little boy, a very charming little boy, with eyes at once brave and dreamy. I know from my friend Mary O'Neill that he was happy in his married life till your mother died. I hope he is happy now. Tell me something about your home life and yourself. You were in Austria, were you not?"

They sat and talked, till her Ladyship's maid came with a reminder that it was time to be within doors, for one who was yet an invalid. The Dowager, who seemed very submissive to her maid's will, agreed to going to bed early after a light meal. So Meg had her evening alone.

She was happier than she had been since she came. Doubtless the beautiful weather and the glory and fragrance round about her helped to uplift her spirits. She had a curious sense, for nothing had happened to make her feel it, of being embarked on a great enterprise. A strange moment for such high courage, with the horror and calamity of the Earl's disappearance still lying upon the house. She looked out over the sea, rippled with the south-west wind, broken into a million glittering lights and facets. Was the Earl's body tossing out there unburied?

While she thought it, standing in the courtyard, the beds of which were filled with forget-me-nots and wallflowers, with clove carnations and pansies, something touched her foot. It was the dove which had flown in the night of the storm, and was as much at home in the house as any of the inmates. It was a handsome male pigeon with a green head and breast, of a quite uncommon insolence and courage for one of its kind. It had taken possession of the fenders during the cold weather, and was quite

prepared to tackle dogs or anything else that disputed its right to be there. Now it had hopped out into the sun and, bent on attracting her attention, was pecking at her foot.

She had said she was not superstitious, but the bird flying in out of the storm had uplifted her. So did Julia's steady denial, even when she had her lucid intervals, of Lord Turloughmore's death. A lot was there to lean on, she told herself with stern rebuke—a lost pigeon and a mad old woman. There could be no doubt that Lord Turloughmore and all his men had been lost in the yacht. They must have been lost, else what had become of them?

The next morning her irrational hope was dashed to earth. A stove-in boat was drifted up on the beach, battered to pieces almost by the wind and weather, bearing on its stern the name "Clytie," by which Lord Turloughmore had called his yacht.

Little by little, said the fishermen, the wreck of the yacht was coming home.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE TRUCE

It was a month later when Meg came back to prepare for the travellers. She had been very happy in the dear, shabby, comfortable, love-lit home, less populated now than of old, since so many of the children were at school.

“ You’ll be staying with us now, Meg ? ” said Terence Hildebrand fondly, the evening she came home. “ Sure the house is not the same with so many of the children out of it. I do sometimes awake in the night and ask myself where my children are all gone to. I never thought I’d have a little girl of mine earning her bread.”

Meg kissed him.

“ Pauline is very happy with the Archduchess,” she said. Pauline was the second sister, who had gone to take Meg’s place. “ Now that Aunt Agatha has come you won’t miss her. Are we not lucky girls, we Hildebrands, that when we must go out into the world we should find such dear employers ? ”

“ You’re really happy at Castle Eagle ? ” Terence



Hildebrand asked wistfully. "Isn't it a gloomy place with all that trouble hanging over it? I was grieved to the heart, indeed I was so, when I heard of the loss of the yacht; I suppose there's no doubt the poor fellow's gone with it. Ireland could ill afford to lose the like of him."

Another time Meg had commented to her father on the strange coincidence of a Hildebrand entering the house of a Rosse, leading him on to tell the old story in his own way, which, except in the matter of detail, did not differ materially from the story as she had heard it.

"I was all against your going at first, Meg," he said; "but afterwards I knew I could trust my girl. There is something the matter with the son, isn't there? Not right in the head or something of the sort."

"He is quite right in the head," Meg said indignantly, colouring hotly as she said it. "There is something wrong with his foot. He was born like it. It cripples him and gives him great pain."

"Like poor Byron," commented Terence Hildebrand, as though the poet were a personal acquaintance. "I never could forgive that girl for calling Byron a lame boy. The poor fellow never forgot it. I'm sorry for the young Lord. He hasn't taken the title yet, I believe."

"He won't, till there is proof."

“Till the sea gives up its dead, you mean. I don't suppose it will give up poor Turloughmore now. The young fellow will be a long time waiting. They treat you well, Meg? To be sure they do. People like them would know how to treat a lady. The old lady used to visit at the O'Neills' house, Kilcloney, when I was a boy staying there because my own mother was dead. You were good to poor Lady Turloughmore in her sorrow, Meg?”

“What do you think?”

“To be sure you were, to be sure you were. Upon my word, Meg, they should be obliged to me for letting a girl like you go to them. You have an uplifting look, an uplifting look, Meg, as though you'd shoulder a task other people would never set their minds to.”

Meg said nothing. She wondered what her father would think if he knew that day and night now she prayed that it might be given to her, a Hildebrand, to help to fight the shadows which lay heavily upon the Earls of Turloughmore.

She was half-shocked because she was so eager to go back. She tried to persuade herself that she was not eager, but she was too honest to deceive herself for long, so she fell back on the argument that something awaited her hand, something which only she could do, to explain why she found the kind, sweet days at home slow in passing.

There was something of contrition in the way she kissed her father and the children the morning she left. Terence was a little puzzled and shy before his daughter's ardent embrace and the flash of tears in her eyes.

"There, Meg, there!" he said soothingly. "If you care so much, child, in the name of Heaven stay at home. I'll write and say they can't have you. Mary O'Neill let me in for this. I never meant you to go off earning your bread instead of enjoying yourself as you ought to at your age."

"In the name of Heaven I must go," she said, smiling through her tears. "You cannot imagine, Papa, how much I have to do. If you knew you would be the first to tell me to go."

"Why, then, go and God speed you!" Terence said, standing by the car which was to convey his daughter to the station, shaking himself into his old shabby coat, for there was a mist of rain driving down from the hills, as though he were a big dog.

They drove off, leaving a disconsolate row of children and dogs standing by the housedoor. One or two bolder spirits among the dogs had indeed the desperate thought of accompanying them, and put it into practice for a few yards, after which they were deterred by violent speech on the part of their master which had no corresponding anger in his heart.



Meg was haunted after the train had sped on its way, leaving him behind, by the memory of her father's solitary figure as he stood at the end of the platform while she leant out to wave a last farewell ; he had run with the train the length of the platform to see the last of her.

"It isn't Budapest, Papa," she had called out to him. "I can be home any time in a few hours ;" and she saw by the smile on his rosy face under the grizzled hair that he had heard her and was comforted.

Her heart went with him as he jogged homewards through the boggy country without her ; but it was not very long before she could think of him as at home with the children and Mrs. Eyre, his widowed sister, who was devoted to him, whose rule over the youngsters, although a tender one, seemed more efficacious than the rule of elder sisters had ever been.

Once she was sure that he was no longer lonely she allowed her heart to lift, and it sprang up as joyfully as the larks were springing up from all the wide pasture-fields through which the train was passing, having left the bog behind. For what ? Because she was going back to the house of shadows, still darkened over by the blackness of recent grief, with no daylight through its long night of shadows except what her irrational hope had set there.



She could not think of it so. She thought of the house as she had left it behind, open to the breezes from sea and hill, conventually clean, smelling of sweetness and honest living. Ah, there was surely that in the House of the Foxes. The Rosses had a clean reputation. Ask the people, the peasants of long memories ! The witch's curse of long ago alone stood against them. No life was laid at their doors, no outraged hearth, no violated human sanctities. You had only to read the records of the troubled times to discover how the Rosses had been merciful and more to their people.

After a couple of hours in the train she changed, crossed country by a slowly crawling loop-line train : reached a junction and went south. The warmth of the south came up to greet her. She saw the mountains : between the mountains lay golden tracts of fertile lands. The train ran by towns, in valleys with a river flowing through them, the hills either side clothed in richness. She tried to read a book and could not because of the haste of her spirit. At last in the distance rose up the blue hills beyond Castle Eagle. At last, she was nearly home.

The country had clothed itself in verdure since she had last seen it. Anything it had had of a gloomy and forbidding aspect in the winter had passed away. Streams were singing in all the fields

and the trees were out in their first verdure. The pastures were full of daisies. The meadows spread a richness of colour which came to her with a shock of delight. As a background the greenness almost dazzled the eye : if it were not the most restful of colours she could not have looked at it.

It was nearly four years since she had had a spring in Ireland. She said to herself that the joy of it was worth the long hunger of desire. She loved the soft airs, the clear brilliant atmosphere, the little cattle in the fields, the thatched white cottages. The people who came in and out of her carriage ; the old farmer who with a " by your leave, Miss," had extracted a little black pipe from his pocket and began to smoke, against the rules, for it was not a smoking-carriage : the women with baskets ; the blue-eyed children ; the old priest who wore his weather-beaten beaver as though it were a crown ; her heart warmed to them all. How glad she was that it was not the bitter exile to Budapest, where Pauline was so happy.

Terence Hildebrand's children must all fly out of the nest as soon as the time came, being so self-reliant as to amaze that honest gentleman. But they would all fly back again gladly, though perhaps not to remain. He had protested ever since Meg, under Lady O'Neill's wing, had gone off to Budapest. He would be still protesting when the last

one should fly out into the world. He could not understand how the children should be so discontented, seeing that Crane's Nest had always been enough for him.

The country, though it grew barer as Meg's train sped towards the bluest hills in Ireland, yet spread a mantle of verdure only to be equalled by the blue of the sky between the white clouds and the silver of the distant sea.

For a day or two she should be alone at Castle Eagle, except for the servants. The Dowager, who had many friends, had been called away to one who was sick. Meg was disappointed not to see again the old lady who had seemed so ready to enter with her into a conspiracy for the good of the family. She went on thinking of the doom of her friends. Were the Rosses to come to an end and their possessions pass to the cousin three-parts English by blood, whole English by birth, training, education, and traditions, because the last of the Rosses was sickly and ready to lay down the burden of his race for some one who could take it up without the doom attached to it? Her heart cried out against the thought. The good family which Ireland could so ill spare !

She remembered how Lady Turloughmore had said, lifting her head proudly above her grief, that it had been worth while, that despite all the shadows



it had been worth while, and that there were others who would have found it worth while if she had not.

Meg's face softened and glowed. She was looking out of the carriage window at the distant blue hills coming nearer and nearer. She was alone and she spoke above her breath, startling herself.

"Oh, my dear," she said, and it might have been a quotation from Lady Turloughmore: "there are women who would not count the cost."

The orchard trees below the terraces of Castle Eagle were still in a wild bloom of tossed shell-pink and white when she drove up to the door. The creepers which ran over the house-front and up the side of the tower were shining and glossy-green. The window-boxes had been filled, and their brilliant colour shone out against the background of the windows. This side Castle Eagle looked as comfortable, as full of ancient peace as an English manor-house, although on the other side the trees were stunted and blown one way by the wind, and only the ivy could take a foothold against the winter blasts.

She received a passionate welcome from the dogs. Phelim received her with a beaming face, and Kate ran down the stairs to take her small parcels and carry them to her room, with, "You're welcome as flowers in spring, Miss," on her tongue. Even Mrs. Browne, who was no longer as light as she had been



on her feet, climbed from the house-keeper's room in the basement to welcome Meg back. Meg had a way with her as far as servants were concerned : and it was a country in which a dependent position was not remembered against her since she belonged to a family that was in it before the mountains were made.

She was quite ready to wait for the return of the travellers. The winter storms and the winter trouble might never have been for all trace there was of them in this sweetly smelling house, sitting all day in the sun and the sea-wind, fragrant with the breath of gardens, musical with the song of birds, the droning of insects, and the lapping of the sea in a drowsy murmur below the cliffs.

There was no hint of decay at all about Castle Eagle. The forlornness which lies over many an Irish house, great and small, was not there. She wandered through the rooms, delighting in their mellowness of colour, in their dim richness and beauty. She went round the gardens with a sense of possession, wondering to see how the summer had followed on the spring, how the roses were coming into bloom, and the white moths fluttering above the irises and in and out the tree peonies. She went to the edge of the terrace and looked down at the orchard in bloom. Plum and pear and cherry were over : she was so glad to have captured the last of

the apple-bloom. It was at its height, already whitening the ground beneath it. Under her window in the courtyard there was a low tree as pink as the pinkest rose. It had not yet shed a petal. She hoped it would keep its beauty till the travellers returned.

Kate, unpacking her trunk, was giving her the local news. Not much of it, for neighbours were few and far between. Julia, she said, was growing "more of a tormint" than ever. She hadn't yet got the wind out of her head.

"'Tis annoyin' her Ladyship she'll be instead of lettin' the crathur rest. Her tongue's never off his poor Lordship. God rest him; an' she's as merry as a cricket makin' ready for him that'll never come home.

"I wouldn't be botherin' wid her to-night, Miss," Kate said earnestly. "'Tis as like as not you'd find her in bed. She doesn't seem to know day from night half the time. I hope to goodness she won't be burnin' herself to death in her bed, an' the rest of us wid her, one of these nights. I don't know but it wouldn't be the kindest turn you could do her to make an end of her, she do be that onaisy. 'Tis in an' out like a dog at a fair, it do be wid her, seein' if the Earl is come, enough to break any one's heart, an' him tossin' about in the say. 'Tis the handsome gentleman he was, and many a poor

girl would have given up all for him if he asked her, but he never did, not like some gentlemen I could tell of. The Rosses were always good."

Meg's heart lifted at the praise. She was so glad the Rosses were always good. She had a fear that if they were not so good she might yet have been constrained, unhappily, to love them.

Now she was happy in the house, among these familiar things that awaited them, with a peace, like a Truce of God, lying sweetly on the world.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE DAWN

GOING up to bed at ten o'clock, with a wonderful pale green light still in the sky and the fragrance of dew-drenched flowers arising from the garden, Meg was aware of a line of light showing through the door at the end of the corridor which closed off the nurseries.

She remembered what Kate had said about the possibility of fire and went along the corridor to the open door.

Julia was sitting by the table, sewing by candle-light. She had evidently just got out of bed, for she was in night-clothes which, with the frilled cap she was wearing, cast fantastic shadows on the ceiling above her head.

She displayed no surprise at seeing Meg.

"Good evenin', Miss," she said, and stood up to make a dipping curtsey. "I couldn't sleep, so I couldn't, for the noise o' them ould crows an' starlin's, let alone the gulls. So I thought I'd get up and do a bit o' sewing for the time the Earl



'ud come home. I've had it in my hands a good bit now. Sure I can take my time. I wish it was a dozen strong lads in it tearin' an' reefin' the clothes off their backs, an' me to be mendin' them. I wouldn't grumble. The house is too quiet, that's what it is."

"Yes," said Meg, with a sorrowful inflection of her voice: "it is too quiet."

"'Tis only a pack of idle sarvants waitin' on her Ladyship and Lord Erris, that one could wait on well enough. Aye, indeed, it's rale quality ways they have, with 'plase' and 'thank you' never out of their mouths. 'Tis atin' their heads off the sarvants do be, the same as the horses in the stable. I'd send a dozen o' them packin', so I would."

Meg smiled. She knew that Julia, who considered herself a member of the family, was much more captious with the other servants than their employers were ever likely to be.

"Still there's the house," she said, "if the family isn't large or very troublesome. The house must be kept up."

"That's what I call the foolishness of human ways," said Julia, bitterly. "They builds houses an' thin they pays sarvants to wait on the houses. What a lot o' trouble we do be creatin' for ourselves, just to give work to a pack of impident sarvants."

“What is it you are making for the Earl?” Meg asked gently. She was wondering if she could prevail upon Julia to lay aside the work for the Earl before Lady Turloughmore came home.

Julia lifted the long web of fine linen, and for a second Meg’s heart turned cold. Was it—a shroud?

The next moment dispelled the terror.

“I’m makin’ new pillow-cases for his Lordship’s bed,” Julia went on, with an air of pride. “Sure the stuff they do be puttin’ in them in the shops would never stand the wash-tub. I’ve knit his Lordship’s stockings and I’ve made his body-linen since he was in my arms, a baby. Many and many a time he used to say my fine warm stockings saved his life an’ him out in the yacht or on the bog shootin’.”

“If I were you I’d go to bed now,” Meg said, in a tone of gentle persuasiveness. “The starlings and rooks and gulls are quiet now. But they begin again so early in the morning.”

“I will, dear, I will,” the old woman answered, with unexpected docility. “They do be makin’ a dreadful noise about the tower, for all the world as though some wan’ was wringin’ the necks o’ them. ’Tis a quare place the tower. Ever since I can remember there was quare noises in it, aye an’ quare lights. It’s ha’nted, to be sure. I wouldn’t like

to be meetin' the quare, hungry ghost as is in it. If I had my way I'd have him laid, the same as Father William Grace laid a ghost down at Coolmine."

Whatever the story of the laying was, Meg was not destined to hear it. Julia's thoughts were very inconsequent. She whisked away from the subject of Father William Grace and the ghost without more ado.

"Bad luck to them gulls," she said. "They screech on the Little Beach fit to bother you. I suppose 'tis fishin' they are. The cliff above the Little Beach is like a rabbit-burrow with their nests. There isn't much else could live in it."

Meg knew what was called the Little Beach, a wet half-moon of sand, visible at low tide, just below the face of the cliffs. The wall of the cliff rose sheer above it. The horns of the half-moon of cliff in which it lay were the North Wolf and the South Wolf, immense cliffs projecting out into the sea, with a reef of jagged rocks lying below them. The Little Beach was sacred to the gulls and cormorants, which at low tide might be observed standing pensively there gazing out to sea. There was a paling along the cliffs' edge over which you might look to catch a glimpse of the Little Beach at low tide. It was not accessible, except by boat, and few fishermen cared to approach it at the risk of the reef tearing their boats asunder and drowning them.



She got Julia off to bed and went to her own room, thinking of the truth of what the old woman had said that we build houses not to serve us but to be served by us.

She was very glad to sleep, and she slept ; but she was soon awakened.

In the furbishing of the room which had taken place in her absence, the curtains with which her bed-head was draped had been removed, and white linen ones substituted. At the head of her bed the starched curtains gaped, and she had not noticed it. Now she felt a draught stirring her hair on the pillow ; it had aroused her as though cold fingers had passed through her hair. Sleepily she got up, leaning on an elbow to draw the curtains closer. Her hand touched the wall. She discovered that it was chintz drawn tight as a drum that covered the walls and not a flowery paper as she had thought it.

She fell asleep having drawn the curtain. She awoke once more, this time with her heart in her mouth. There had been some noise close to her ear. A tremendous noise. It might have been the report of a gun. She had an idea that she smelt powder. The crackling of wood had been in her ears. Surely there was a smell of burning wood.

She jumped out of bed in some alarm and went out into the corridor. The house lay in the strange



unreal light of the summer dawn. Through the windows she caught a glimpse of the fields still asleep : the hills with the mists curling and rolling away from them. In the fields were cattle and sheep. Above the hills hung an eagle, motionless it seemed. The world looked like a picture, still life indeed, as it looks at early morning, awaiting the touch that shall bid it live.

There was no smoke in the corridor. The air was fresh and pure. Not a stir in the house. The servants were not yet lighting the morning fires. She went back into her room. The greyness of the dews had been on the fields and she felt cold in her thin night-gown, with her windows open to the sea. The faint smell of wood-smoke still lingered. She explained it to herself. The gardeners had left a heap of smoking rubbish somewhere. She remembered to have seen a spiral of smoke ascending in the courtyard.

She must have dreamt the noise—unless it came from the sea. The sea was calm, almost waveless, as though it could never be lashed to fury. From the short grass, dry and brittle, studded with a myriad little snail-shells, over the Wolves and the Little Beach, the larks rose shrilling into the air. The gulls wheeled and poised, uttering shrill cries. Everything was sweet and quiet. She must certainly have dreamt the noise.

A memory came to her of having heard such a noise before, in the winter darkness. Then she had been terrified at first. But who could be frightened now, with the long shaft of the morning sun piercing the blinds and falling goldenly on her bed. Yet the early morning had a strange sense of solitude.

She lay with closed eyes, and while she waited for sleep to come the clock in the stable-yard struck four o'clock.

She was not to sleep so easily, although there was a drowsiness upon her. Prince, who had welcomed her in the corridor with a quiet and dignified delight characteristic of him, had followed her into the room. Now he showed a curious uneasiness, sniffing and whining about the walls. She called him to her sleepily, laying a hand upon his head, and presently he lay down on the rug beside her and was quiet while she slept.

She said to herself, getting up in the familiar morning room, that if such things had happened in the winter dark she might well be frightened. Impossible to be afraid in the shining summer dawn, and with the companionship of such a splendid brave protector as Prince.

She was standing, brushing out her long hair at the glass. It was full of light. The sun was in it and brought a million sparks and running trails of

light as you sometimes see it in a peat fire when there is a meteoric trail of light and then darkness.

Her brush lifted in her hand she had a sudden revelation ; she turned and stared at the wall behind her, the wall against which the head of her bed stood. She had discovered the reason for the chintz, and also for the curious chill she had often felt in the room despite warm rugs and deep carpets and splendid fires. The wall of her room was the wall of the tower. The chintz was stretched tightly over its irregularities and roughnesses. She could see and feel them through it. The next thing that occurred was—had there ever been any communication between the tower and her room.

She drew the little French bedstead away from the wall. She passed her hands over the chintz. There was nothing but the hardness of the stone beneath. She could feel the rough edges of the granite under her hand—the strong wall of the tower, built for Eternity rather than Time, enclosing its secret as in the bowels of the earth and the depths of the sea.

Her imagination leaped beyond the stone wall and saw the crumbling skeleton of the man who had starved to death there, caught by his remorseless enemy like a rat in a trap. A handful of crumbling bones amid the litter of ages, the sand, the dead leaves on the floor, in the dimness of the stone room



pierced only by the arrow-slit. She wondered if the poor soul was at rest ; if it craved a sleeping-place in the green earth for what remained of its body. "May the Lord have mercy upon Conal M'Garvey," she said, as many a one had said before her.

She tried to banish the tremor of fear that shook her with the discovery. She could not be afraid in broad daylight. She had a thought that she would ask permission to change her room. But no : that would be cowardice ; that would be running away ; that would be to yield to the superstition against which she had talked so bravely. Poor Conal M'Garvey ! Doubtless his soul was in glory long ago. She remembered the grim saying of an old peasant at Crane's Nest, who, unlike his kind, was sceptical about ghosts. "Believe me, Miss Meg, them that's in Heaven won't want to lave it an' them that's in hell won't be let lave it, if they want to itself."

Supposing there had been a noise—she wasn't sure there had been, that she had not dreamt it—it could have no power over her in this golden day. Something of a strange happiness seemed to brood over the world. She dressed herself quickly and went down into the dew-drenched garden where the birds were singing. The mists had rolled away from the mountains while yet the plains might have



been a lake, so motionless was the surface of silver that hid the fields and villages within its depths.

The world seemed new-made, so beautiful was it ; just straight from the hands of God. There was a brooding happiness and peace in the day. There are such days in human life, foretastes of heaven, when beatitude seems to fill the heart, flowing in, brimming it to its heights, filling it to its depths, like the sea. She asked herself why she felt such a radiant happiness. Was it because Lady Turloughmore and Lord Erris were coming home ? She had good reports of them. Lady Turloughmore had gained a measure of resignation. Her bodily health had benefited by the peace of her spirit.

Was it because they were coming home ? What did she expect to happen because of their return ? How did it come that she who had been used to be called the cold Englishwoman by the golden youths of the Schloss, because indeed her heart kept its untouched solitude through all their flowery speeches and daring looks—how was it she was building so much on these comparatively new friends ?

She was not altogether sure that her beatitude was concerned with their return. There were two whole days and a night before they should come back. She had no desire to hasten the time. The sweet hours should go as slowly as they would for

all desire she had to hasten them. There was a curious sense of bliss in being there in the exquisite weather, a sense of benediction, which nothing could heighten. It was one of the hours when the soul slips from the body and regains Paradise with a sense of home-coming. Perhaps it was because of the exquisite weather and the spring in Ireland which she had desired so long.

As she stood dipping her finger in the fountain, a flock of pigeons, which had come to drink, strutting daintily about her feet—they looked so clean, so demure with their feathers of slate grey and their feet like scarlet sealing-wax—she was again struck with a sense of the unreality of the morning world. It looked so clean and clear, emerging from the mists. One shared in the renewal of everything, being out in it. She looked up at the long ranges of blinded windows. How could any one do anything so dull as to sleep in a darkened room, on such a heavenly morning? The sense of being utterly alone in that shining, morning world, gave her a thrill of delight.

She had a good deal of time to put in before the servants were about. They took it more easily than usual in the absence of the family, and it had been something of a distress to Kate that Miss Hildebrand would not have her breakfast in bed and be pampered and lapped about in luxury, but

must get up and dive into a stone-cold bath, and go walking on an empty stomach, which to Kate's mind were about as dangerous things as any one could do.

She looked about her and saw that the mists were clearing away before the power of the sun. The fields lay steaming in a golden haze. The woods were revealing themselves out of the shrouding vapours.

Something scattered the strutting pigeons ; drove them to flight. Lady Turloughmore's pet pigeon had followed her from the house ; the creature had become as tame as a dog, and was disputing the pride of place near her. By this time he would attempt even to drive Prince away, and while the other dogs treated the bird as an enemy to be fought or propitiated, Prince treated him with a characteristic dignity and forbearance. She picked up the bird and put it on her shoulder where it preened itself against her neck.

The clock in the stable-yard pealed out five silvery strokes. It would be at least three hours before she could think of breakfast. She had a sense of exhilaration that made her feet light. She remembered in a corner of the garden a gate that led into the woods where the owls hooted at night. She thought she would explore that way which she had not taken hitherto.

Laughing to herself at the thought of old Phelim's mystification when he should come down to an unbarred, unbolted door, she took the path into the wood, Prince frolicking decorously about her, the pigeon cooing on her shoulder, as she went.



## CHAPTER XIII

### BIDDY PENDERGAST'S COTTAGE

SHE emerged from the wood on to a hillside alive with rabbits who sat at the doors of their homes, washing their innocent faces in the morning dew. The appearance of the dog was a signal for a scurry, a noiseless scurry, which in a breath left the hillside bare of life. She went on down the hill, past clumps of blackberry-bushes which at one point surrounded a steep quarry, from the stones of which, in all probability, Castle Eagle had been built.

She glanced over the edge of the quarry and drew back sharply. There was a sheer fall of a hundred feet to the hewn-out pit below. How easy it would be to walk over the edge, although the ivy had grown in thick masses and sent out long trails to catch at the unwary foot and hold it back. There was something cold and lonely about the quarry in the shining morning. She turned away from it with a feeling that was almost relief, and went on down to the meadow below, where the corncrakes were sawing in an ecstasy of the summer spirit. If she

had not known it to be a long-legged bird, she would have thought the corncrake some faun-like creature, sitting on a grey rock in the summer heat, making rude music that is the very voice of the summer itself.

The meadow had been cut by the scythe close to the hedges, in preparation for an early mowing, so that there should be a way for the machine to pass. She took that way over the pale green of the lopped grasses. A little stream sang in the ditches. The hedge was yet white with the may, which was responsible for the fragrance that ascended in the air these days and nights. The stream was so clear that it seemed to run over shining sands of gold, set with jewels which in the hand would be only pebbles. A dark furry creature, a badger or some such beast, ran across the track and disappeared in the ditch, causing a great excitement and quite a futile chase on the part of the stately Prince.

Now the stream dived and ran between double hedges. Meg knew such ways. How often as a child she had sat by such a little amber stream, between enclosing walls of greenery, in a dim light, revelling in the enchanted mystery and secrecy of the double hedge.

She did not explore this one now. She kept along by the edge of the meadow. It was going to be a hot day. There had been great dews, such

dews as had often hung on her eyelashes and hair like rain as she and her father drove home in the summer dawn from some festivity.

She followed the little path along by the edge of the meadow. It came to the boundary hedge and climbed a bank through a gap into the next field. The field was sown with young oats that sent up their silken, emerald spears like a little army of banners above the brave earth.

About the middle of the field was something that attracted her attention, a building of some kind or other. She had a curiosity to see what it might be ; and turning aside from her path she went towards it between the lines of the young oats. It was rich country, of dark brown mould, very fertile. Therefore it was a somewhat surprising thing to find a considerable space in the centre of the field as bare as your hand, except for a few tufts of weeds, enclosing in its dreary square the thing which she had taken for a cabin or a rough cattle-shed.

It was in fact the gable of a cottage, the gable, a bit of the wall and what had been a portion of a chimney, the stones rising in ledges one above the other blackened with smoke.

As she stepped on to the bare patch and looked at the ruin she was all of a sudden aware of the greatest sense of desolation. Had a cloud been drawn over the sun that the golden morning was



turned cold? A low wind sighed about the fields. The immense loneliness of the Irish landscape at twilight came upon her, daunting her spirit. Something seemed to pass her by in the chilly wind, lifting her hair.

Prince pressed himself against her as though he would push her back. He growled: and looking down at him she saw his spine lift sharply. What devilry was in the place that the dog saw and she did not see?

For a moment she felt impelled to turn and run. But she was afraid of her own cowardice. A person whose daily life was not spent among shadows could afford to be frightened; not she. If she once let fear enter into her stronghold she was lost. Fear is a relentless master.

She went forward a step or two. "In the Name of God," she said aloud. "In the Name of God."

The sun was shining once more and the sun was warm. She stooped and patted the dog. She had infected him with her fear. What was there in a ruined gable set in the middle of a field to frighten any one?

Looking about her eye lit on the figure of a scarecrow at a little distance. She might as well be frightened of that. She stood and noticed gulls blown in by the storm swooping daintily down between the rows of oats in search of food. A flight



of rooks came from the wood, also on the hunt for provender. It was an odd thing. They broke their flight before passing over the bare patch with its gable, dividing in two lines which passed to either side.

A coincidence, of course ; it could be nothing but a coincidence. She had regained her courage in the Name of God ; and she would not be daunted. She went forward and inspected the gable and the adjoining wall and bit of chimney-piece. It must be very old. The stone slabs of which it was built were of great age. Doubtless some of the slabs were sunk in the earth ; others lay heaped about overgrown with nettles. Nothing grew there but the dock and the nettle.

She turned to walk away, quietly, without panic. Among the weeds her foot struck against something, a piece of metal, a ring of iron perhaps. She forgot it in observing for the first time that Prince had not followed her, but was sitting bolt upright between the rows of oats, watching her with an anxious and grim expression. When he saw her come to join him he turned about with one of his sedate gambols, ran along between the oats, came back and leaped on her ; altogether displayed great relief at her turning her back upon the ruined gable.

She extended her walk and came home by the orchards below the house, where there was still a

drift of blue-bells under the trees, although the bloom had fallen and the little fruit was forming on the boughs.

Her appearance in the dining-room, where the table was set for her with as much care as though she were one of a large party, drew a compliment from Phelim.

" 'Tis like Diana you are or the Graces, Miss," he said.

Meg laughed. She found Phelim's humorous, respectful ways, his roguish, innocent old face, irresistible.

" I've been on foot since five o'clock," she said, " and I'm as hungry as a hunter."

" Glory be to goodness," said Phelim, " why would you be gettin' up in the middle of the night like that, Miss, unless it was to be that you'd be taken for Aurora? It was a misty mornin'. It'll be a hot day."

Meg laughed merrily. She had a very happy and infectious laugh.

" I don't know where you got your acquaintance with all those fine people, Diana and Aurora and the Graces—— "

" Ay, an' Hebe too and Venus an' Helen of Troy. Unless it was to be I had a grandfather a school-master."

" That might be it," said Meg, setting to with

zest on her eggs and bacon, the delicious perfume of the Irish coffee in her nostrils.

Phelim watched her with the greatest enjoyment, looking all the time the very personification of dignity.

“Ye’ll have found the fields wet, Miss,” he said. “I understand from the state of the dog’s paws that you took the field-way.”

“We did, indeed ; and there was a heavy dew. Prince got wetter than I did, for he would run in and out of the meadows.”

“’Tis well a farmer didn’t catch him at it ; a dog like that, as big as a calf, would trample down a dale of medda.”

“It would soon rise again in the sun. Tell me, please, Phelim”—she took a slice of the toast which Phelim brought to her—“I want to know something. Beyond the wood and the hill where the quarry is and the meadow, you come to a field of oats. There’s the gable of an old house in a queer big bare patch. Why don’t they root up the old house and plough the bare patch ? It looks so odd and wasteful in the middle of a beautiful fertile field.”

“Is it that, Miss ? Ye haven’t been wanderin’ there on your peregrinations ? That was a very unlucky spot for ye to come to on a mornin’ walk ? There isn’t a man in the country ’ud dare to plough up that bare patch as you call it, Miss, not even if it



would grow anything but weeds, an' that I am sure it wouldn't. The birds of the air won't pass over it. As for the ould stones they'd bring a curse anywhere they wint. Nothin'll grow on the bare patch but docks and nettles, an' when the field was pasture the very bastes wouldn't go over it. The dew never falls on it, they say. There's a curse on the place."

"What put the curse on it?" Meg asked.

"I wouldn't be sayin' anything to his Lordship or her Ladyship about it if I was you, Miss." He looked at her with his alluring slyness. "Because, ye see, 'tis an unlucky ould spot. That was Biddy Pendergast's cottage, the Lord betune us an' harm! There isn't a man in the country 'ud plough that field by himself. I wouldn't blame them. The horses do be tuk with the greatest of terror, the crathurs, as soon as they comes near it. They say 'tis pitiful to see them, the poor dumb bastes."

Meg did not feel that she could rebuke this superstition as whole-heartedly as she would have done yesterday. For a moment she too had known the blind, unreasoning terror.

"There was worse than Biddy Pendergast," Phelim went on, enjoying himself in the rôle of story-teller. "There was some terrible wild gentlemen in this country a hundred years ago or more. Maybe you heard tell o' them. They was a branch of



the ould Hell-Fire Club in Dublin that used to have the divil himself to supper wid them. They used to meet in ould Biddy's cottage for their Bacchanalian fastes, affrontin' the devil, I call it. They said they raised him aisy enough an' that he played cards with them after supper an' won Mr. Rody MacNamara's soul from him. Anyhow that night there was a most terrific thunderstorm. They said it broke at the minit the divil flung down the Five of Trumps and shouted 'Game!' The others went over on their faces like dead min an' when they come to they found Mr. Rody MacNamara burnt up to a cinder."

"Are you sure it wasn't just an ordinary thunderstorm?"

"Is it me?" Phelim's face assumed an expression of offence. "I've lived too long in the world to be sure of anything, Miss, but you're a great unbeliever all the same, and no offence mint. Not but what in a place like this it isn't wiser to believe too little thin too much. I wouldn't be sayin' but what it was a thunderstorm. I wance knew a man be struck by lightnin' that came down the chimney an' him sittin' by the fire smokin'. There wasn't a bit of harm in him."

"There mightn't have been in Mr. Rody MacNamara either," said Meg.

"They've a dale of ould chat out of thim," said

Phelim, suddenly shifting his ground. "'Tis very ignorant an' common to be took up wid them superstitious observances. Some people have gullets as big as a fish ; they'd swally anything. Look here now, Miss : if I was you I wouldn't be botherin' over them ould stories. They do say 'twas the smugglers gev the place a bad name because they had a passage betune it an' the cliffs to get their barrels up by. There isn't anybody 'ud be likely to look to see if it was true."

The event of the morning cast no shadow over Meg's radiant day. She put the uncanny place and her momentary terror out of her mind while she went about doing all manner of little things in the house which a daughter might have done, and singing to herself for pure pleasure that the world was so good and that the shadows must still flee before the light. The sense of a happy expectancy was over all the hours.

During her holiday her godmother had added to her wardrobe one really charming frock. Nothing could have been simpler than the garment of cream-coloured silky muslin that might have passed through a ring, trimmed simply with quantities of beautiful old lace. It was much prettier than anything Meg had hitherto possessed. She wondered if she might wear it for the home-coming to-morrow night, with a green ribbon at the waist. It was so simple a

toilet that no man, at all events, would know that its simplicity covered something very good.

She went to her room early and sat by her window, with a shaded candle, making some slight alteration in the frock. The owls had begun to hoot in the wood, although the green light was yet in the sky : and the blackbirds were shouting "good night," keeping the birds awake when they should be sleeping. She was out of sight of the wood, but she imagined the long aisles of it silvered by moonlight, and the stir of the little wood-creatures everywhere.

As though the thought had caused the thing she was aware of a stealthy movement somewhere close at hand. Not in the room. She thought it was not in the room. The birds in the ivy outside. It must be the birds in the ivy, the little ones pressing and pushing for room in the over-full nests.

She glanced suspiciously at her bed, where it stood against the walls of the tower. There was a fumbling, a pushing somewhere. Rats in the wall. An old house like Castle Eagle was certain to be riddled by rats.

The sounds ceased. All was quiet. Except for the hooting of the owls and the last good night of the blackbirds there was not a sound.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE GAME OF CHESS

THERE was a golden quietness over the next day, which long afterwards Meg remembered. What fruition, what budding and flowering of happiness was it that her heart waited for with a satisfied expectancy? She could not have told. She only knew that as the golden day spilled out its sands she would not have lost one minute of it. She did not desire to hasten it towards its end. Whatever waited her at the end that was to be better than all else she would not anticipate it. The day was enough.

She kept busy, while feeling that she could have sat with folded hands letting the hours run by her. Not without an effort did she sink into the strange happiness which seemed one of the enchantments of the place. She was no sentimentalist. She had not the foolish fancies of other girls for this or that male creature. The Archduchess had commended her discretion, because of her management of the



white-and-gold hussar, who had moved Meg no more than if he had been an Emperor moth.

She did not ask herself whither her absorption in the new friends was leading her. She was not in the mood for troublesome questions. She laid hold upon the passion of pity which Lady Turloughmore's need had excited in her and let that suffice. She spent the day in decking the rooms with flowers, in rearranging, in decorating ; everything had been made thoroughly sweet and clean, and it was only left to her to give the last decorative touches.

She was rearranging a shelf of china in a corner of the drawing-room, an obscure corner, when she heard Phelim's voice behind her.

" They'll never notice it at all, Miss, for all the trouble you've taken," he said, shaking his grey head, with his air of cheerful and humorous wisdom ; and Meg felt startled and abashed.

" Everything's done so well here, Phelim," she said, " that I've to make an occupation for myself."

" Sure you might be sittin' down wid a book," said Phelim : " or takin' the dogs for a walk. They're as unaisy as yourself, knowin' somethin's goin' to happen, all except Prince, an' he keeps the onaisiness locked up in him because he's too proud to show it like commonality dogs."

" I'd better take them out to work it off," Meg said, as she came down from her step-ladder ; but

though she carried it off gaily she felt very shy over the fact that Phelim had surprised her anticipation.

She took the dogs for a long walk and came back to find the house quieter and sweeter than ever in the long, golden afternoon sun. The hall-door stood open. Except in a storm doors and windows had a way of standing open at Castle Eagle. The gardens were all smiling in the sun. Thrushes and black-birds, linnets and finches were singing : larks were rising all over the short pastures close to the sea. As she stood on the steps of the hall-door she noticed that the tower threw a long shadow which made the front of the house almost cold. She shivered. Vaguely she felt that the shadow of the tower, between the sun and the flowers, was like the shadow of the old cruelty that lay between the Earls of Turloughmore and the happiness and peace other men enjoyed.

The mood passed as she entered the house. It was a good house, she thought, as she entered it. Whatever had been done far back in the past, for many generations now the family had been above reproach. It had purged itself. Religion and charity had made their home in Castle Eagle. Surely the visible blessing must follow ; or else the promises were unfulfilled.

“ Late, late in the gloaming,” they came home.

Meg was in the hall to receive them, on the doorstep, helping Lady Turloughmore to alight from the carriage, feeling her hand taken in a warm clasp by Lord Erris, collecting innumerable small packages ; a little afraid of the light and shy radiance she felt now to be on her face as she followed them into the dining-room.

Miss Roche, in her ridiculous poke-bonnet and cloak with capes, was to stay the night. Impossible to have an awkward moment with Miss Roche of the company. She presented herself in a new aspect to Meg. No courier could have more knowledge of Europe, its hotels and picture-galleries and scenery and all the rest of it, than Miss Roche. She poured out a flood of talk during the supper-time. There was no possible moment for awkward pauses.

A disgraceful trunk, covered with cowhide from which the hair had come off in patches, stood in the hall, waiting till Miss Roche's temporary man-of-all-work should come to fetch it in the morning. She carried all the things she needed for the moment in a string bag and hold-all. An odd shape she must have been, with her distinguished companions, piloting them over Europe : but hardly surprising to the peoples who expect any eccentricity from the travelling English.

The little old face was falling into lines of fatigue before the supper concluded, and Miss Roche



assented readily enough to Lady Turloughmore's suggestion that she should go to bed.

"I'll have a deal to do as soon as I get home," she said, "so I'd better be getting rest when I can. The house won't be the better of a month's absence from it, and it falling to pieces already."

"Stay with us a few days, Anastasia, and let me send over a couple of maids to make the house ready for you. Seeing what you've done for us."

But Miss Roche shook her head vehemently.

"Maybe it's too far gone for charring," she said. "Anyhow I like the house as it is."

Meg had noticed with joy that Lady Turloughmore was looking almost herself again. She had not put on mourning. In her gray travelling dress and little hat with a grey gauze veil twisted about it she had more of a twilight air than ever; but though her expression was sad she had regained colour and she looked in good health.

"I am so glad to be at home," she said, gazing about at all her familiar things, "so glad! There will be so much to do and to see to-morrow. The creatures, the gardens—what is up in the gardens, Miss Hildebrand? It seems ages since we went away. No change would surprise me."

"There is still some apple-blossom left," said Meg. "I've been watching it jealously, fearing it



would fall off before you came. The first wind will scatter it."

"Supposing we see it to-night—lest a wind should spring up before morning," said Lord Erris. "It is a pity it's so dark. But a lantern will show us the apple-blossom, or else we may never see it this year."

He too was looking the better for his change. There was a certain excitement about him quite new in Meg's experience of him. She said to herself that the change had heartened him, that he had come back to his youth. He had looked much older than his twenty-seven years in the habitual pain and weariness which had lain upon him like a cloud. To-morrow it might descend again. To-night he was no more than twenty-seven.

Phelim was not surprised at being asked for a lantern so that Lady Turloughmore might see the apple-blossom.

"The wild roses'll be out in sheets over all the hedges, before yez know where yez are," he said confidentially. "I do always be sorry meself whin the hawthorn's over."

They went out, Lord Erris carrying the lantern, Lady Turloughmore with a hand thrust through Meg's arm. Was this to be a companion? Meg asked herself, in a happy excitement. Her father had grumbled at his daughters being governesses or

companions. "Be cooks if ye must," he had said, "and train for it. Try to be the best cook ye can be : don't swing between earth and heaven, belonging to neither." Which was perhaps only the good gentleman's way of expressing his annoyance that his daughters should quit the parental hearth.

Here was no swinging between earth and heaven. There was something in Lady Turloughmore's manner tenderly warm. She leant on Meg's arm. She forgot to call her "Miss Hildebrand" and called her "my dear" instead. She asked for news of Crane's Nest and the Hildebrands. "When the summer holidays come we must have those boys and girls to stay with us," she said. "We are always glad of young things about the place—are we not, Ulick?"

After the apple-tree had been admired Lady Turloughmore would inspect her herbaceous border, and the promise of roses on the pergola, and the special garden in which she kept her favourite flowers, velvety irises and pansies, clove-carnations, lavender and southernwood and all manner of sweet-smelling things. They went round, Lord Erris holding the lantern low so as to bring the flowers within the range of its light. Beyond the circle of the lantern's rays the garden was filled with a dusky twilight, for in the west the light was not yet quite out of the sky and hardly would be before the east was awake. Now and again a bird uttered a startled chirp when

the lantern's rays had fallen upon the nest ; moths fluttered to the light so close that the powdering on their wings was visible.

Lady Turloughmore went up to bed after her inspection of the garden.

" I shall sleep to-night," she said. " It is so quiet after the waterfall, that grew louder every night once the snows had melted."

She allowed Meg to go with her to her bedroom door. Arrived there she turned and kissed her, and the sweetness of the unexpected caress brought the happy flush to the girl's cheeks and the moisture to her eyes.

" It was very sweet to find you awaiting us, my dear," she said. " If my little girl had lived she would have been just your age. Now go down and sing to Ulick. It is good for him to listen to your soft singing."

Meg went back to the drawing-room obediently. There was something about Lady Turloughmore which made it a delight to do her behests.

She went into the drawing-room shyly—her movements were very gentle always. Lord Erris, who had been standing by the chimney-piece, looking down at the ground with a somewhat gloomy air, turned round at the sound of the closing door, his face flashed a gleam of delight, transfiguring it.

" I thought you were gone for the night," he said :



“and I was just wondering how I should put in the evening. It is only half-past nine.”

“Lady Turloughmore said I was to sing to you : afterwards if you wish it, we can play a game of chess.”

“Excellent mother !” he said, quite joyously. “The songs first, then, and the chess afterwards. The blue devils were just lying in wait for me. You have exorcised the blue devils. I shall entertain an angel instead.”

She sang for him, while he stood by the piano and watched her face. Her repertoire was limited : “Silent, O Moyle,” “Has Sorrow Thy Young Days Shaded ?” “She is Far from Land,” the “Ave Maria” of Gounod ; and a new song she had learned in his absence, “Bredon Hill.” She had a little voice, but of a softness like dew or twilight and a most sweet expressiveness.

While she sang the new song he walked away to the fireplace ; and when she turned about at the conclusion to look at him he was standing gazing on the rug at his feet as he had been when she had come into the room.

“I’m afraid you don’t like it,” she said, disappointed.

“The new song ?” he replied. “Oh yes—I like it. It is rather terrible, don’t you think ? I suppose—the bells—would be terrible.”



“ I am so sorry,” she said. “ I won’t sing it any more.”

“ You will, please : to-morrow night and the next. I shall always want to hear it. Perhaps—there is a pleasure in pain.”

She got out the table and the chessmen. She was sorry the song had so moved him. He did not sleep well, she knew, being often a creature of racked nerves. She hoped he would forget the song after a well-contested game of chess, and be ready to sleep.

“ They call it the game of kings,” he said, his hand poised above his men. “ If I was anything but a cripple I should never play a game to which I had to sit.”

Her eyes fluttered and fell before his. It was the first time he had referred to his weakness so nakedly ; and it hurt her.

“ Am I brutal ? ” he asked. “ I have something to tell you. Perhaps I could not be so brutal—to myself—if I had not something to tell. It is my move, is it ? Well, here goes ! ”

He moved his King on the board, and was silent, watching her, while she made a flurried move, smiling at him. She was no great player at chess.

“ I said I had something to tell you—did I ? ” he said. “ Well, it is—we have learnt that—my disability—may be cured. Cured or made

worse. The bone will have to be unknit, a tendon stretched. It will be a case of kill or cure."

"Oh, I am so glad," she said breathlessly. "When will it be? You—do—not hesitate?"

"You advise me to have it done?" he asked slowly.

"Can there be any doubt of it?"

"If it fails it leaves me much worse off."

"It won't fail."

"At my age the bones are pretty well established. But there is a chance."

"No more than a chance?"

"I confess the chance seems worth taking, to myself. If you could know how—hard it has been. It may cripple me worse than ever. On the other hand it may make me like my fellows. Would you wish me to be like my fellows?"

He leant across the chess-board and mechanically moved the pieces. His hand touched hers and the colour sprang to his cheek.

"What do you say?" he asked, in a voice of curious intensity. "Shall I remain as I am or shall I take the risk?"

"I should take the risk," she said: and her eyes fell before his.

## CHAPTER XV

“ LOVE THAT HATH US IN HIS NET ”

THEY finished the game with an outward quietness. If the atmosphere was charged with electricity, if they trembled as their hands met over the pieces, there was no indication of the fact. Nothing could have been more outwardly decorous than the lit drawing-room, the windows open to the summer night and a bright fire on the hearth, because a fire was cheerful to welcome the travellers home, and because there are few evenings in the moist Irish climate when one cares to be without a fire. The young man and the pretty girl, their heads bent over the chess-board, made a quiet picture.

Meg was badly beaten, hopelessly checkmated. Terence Hildebrand, who had taught his daughter chess, would have been ashamed of her as a pupil. She wanted to escape—to get away before anything could happen. She had run up against the thing she most desired and was afraid of it.

She escaped at last, none too soon, for she was afraid of betraying herself. She had begun to

realise with a sinking heart what the exaltation, the golden peacefulness of the last few days meant. She had thought she pitied Lord Erris, pitied him profoundly, and loved and pitied his mother. Her love, her affection for these people, strong enough for the first time in her life to make it possible for her to turn her back on her own home without pangs—she had felt it a treachery that Castle Eagle had had power to draw her from Crane’s Nest without grief, rather with joy—had been something more than she had realised. She had deceived herself.

Alone, in her little room, she sat down and faced things, with flushed cheeks and an excitement which would not be still although she tried to beat it down, to chill it with cold common-sense and worse. The memory of Lord Erris’s eyes as he said good night, as he had stood and watched her pass up the stairs, came over her with a rush of delight, bidding cold common-sense go packing.

Was this then the way love took, by the road of pity, to enter the heart. She had a memory of the white-and-gold hussar, straight, strong, debonair. She had felt a sense of surprise at her own limitations that it was so easy to be discreet where he was concerned. For Lord Erris she had believed herself to have a passionate kindness cheating herself ; and lo and behold it had become love.

For the moment she did not look further than



love. Suddenly it came upon her as a cold shock, that he had let her go. If he had wanted to keep her as she went up the stairs she must have stayed, for love had entered by the gate of pity, and the citadel was surrendered. He had not wished her to stay. It was a dash of cold water on her ardour that he had been willing, even more than willing, to let her go. Some instinct told her that he had been glad when the hour of temptation was over.

She remembered a foolish speech of a foolish young woman, an English governess whom she had met in Vienna.

“At home in England,” Miss Sayers had said, “you and I would be ‘only the governess.’”

What had she been thinking of? She remembered how her god-mother, following the Archduchess, had commended her discretion. What was it she had said? Something to the effect that not every girl could be trusted at Castle Eagle. “They would be making eyes at Lord Erris,” she had said. “He is very handsome, poor boy. I can trust your discretion.” And she, Meg, with the white-and-gold hussar in her memory and certain other fine gentlemen who had been ready to pay her furtive attentions if she had been the girl to receive them, had laughed while she had replied that her discretion could be trusted.

Memories came to her mind of how many times

Lady Turloughmore had thrown her and Lord Erris together : of things the Dowager had said, had seemed about to say : of something in the way Miss Roche had looked at her which had caused her a vague embarrassment. But—was it not because they trusted her discretion ? as the Archduchess had trusted it, but with less reason. She was not the governess of the penny novelettes to believe that the noble son of the house was ready to fall in love with her the minute he looked at her, while his mother, the Countess, stood ready and eager to aid and abet him.

She stood up from her chair, making an impatient gesture as though she flung her folly behind her. If there was to be any more of this nonsense, if she could not trust herself, she would have to go, to put herself out of the occasions of folly. The thought of going was so intolerable to her as to make her realise with a sharp condemnation of herself that if things were so bad as all that she had better go at once, without delay, before she betrayed their trust in her—“ making eyes ”—odious thought !—at Lord Erris.

As she laid her head on the pillow tears came to relieve her. Why could she not have been happy in the simple natural way ? Why need this man, her compassion for whom had warmed to love, be out of her reach ? She had been trusted with him,

not to do anything that would induce him to make love to her. Poor fellow—seeing the life he had led, the solitude he had kept, his abasement over his physical weakness, it was but natural that he should be ready to fall in love with the first young woman who should will it. But no : her heart cried out against that. If he was maimed by a hard fate, there was nothing in him of the weakness that would make him fall in love with any girl who looked at him from under her long lashes. He had more dignity than that.

She asked for light in the night and the morning brought her light. She was first down—sitting behind the urn at the breakfast table when Lady Turloughmore, followed by her son, entered the room. Plainly they had been in conclave : they were still talking as they came in. Lord Erris's face looked eager and young. "The sooner the better," he said, as he came towards the table ; and his mother assented gently : "Yes, the sooner the better, although I could wish you had not the long journey back so soon."

"My dear mother, I shall, I hope, grow accustomed to getting about the world. I have been too long content with being a useless cumbrer of the ground. I shall have so much to see."

Lady Turloughmore sat down at the table, and stretched her hand for her letters.



“ Anything for me, Ulick ? ”

The hope which at one time had been in her expression at such a moment was no longer there. She took her letters listlessly and laid them to one side. The animation of her home-coming had died out this morning. Meg noticed that her blue eyes had a washed-out look as though in the night she had wept in torrents.

“ My son goes to Baden almost at once,” she said to Meg. “ He will not be long with us.”

Meg noticed that nothing was said as to the reason for Lord Erris’s visit to Baden and understood the delicacy that withheld the explanation.

“ You will be able to get on without me, mother,” Lord Erris said, “ now that you have Miss Hildebrand to keep you company. It will not be for very long.”

“ Have you forgotten that Algy Rosse is coming ? ” asked Lady Turloughmore. “ Algy will insist on entertaining and being entertained. We must achieve some mild gaieties for him.”

“ I shall be sorry to miss Algy. He is an agreeable creature,” Lord Erris said. “ Miss Hildebrand, are you equal to entertaining my cousin, Mr. Algernon Rosse ? He is not long down from Oxford, and he has a very pretty taste in art, poetry, and music. He plays tennis and croquet, and can do most things that befit a young gentleman. Withal



he is as modest as having a very good opinion of himself consists with : he has taken a very decent degree at Oxford : he is going into the diplomatic service. He has a pretty, golden moustache, small feet and hands, of which he is not proud, is very careful of his clothes, and dances divinely—I think that is the phrase.”

“ Poor Algy ! ” said Lady Turloughmore. “ You make him out a *petit-maître*, Ulick. He is better than that.”

“ It is pure jealousy,” Lord Erris said grimly. “ An Orson like me cannot be expected to appreciate Prince Charming.”

He hurried through his breakfast and went out to inspect his horses. He was dressed for riding. He had hardly left the breakfast-table when his mother spoke.

“ I am so rejoiced that Ulick is going to see Dr. Kellner,” she said. “ There has been so much doubt about it. Now he seems to have made up his mind. Dr. Kellner has made some wonderful cures, really and truly wonderful. His little house in Baden is thronged as a miraculous shrine might be. They are few he sends away unhealed.”

“ He has seen Lord Erris ? ”

“ Oh yes, he has seen him. He said a terrible thing in his queer German-English. ‘ It ees von of dose gases,’ he said, ‘ dat ees gill or gure, gill or

gure.’ I was horrified till I discovered that the killing would mean things worse and more hopeless than they have been. They have been so bad that I could not wish my poor boy not to take the chance of being cured. Think what it would be to see him walk like other people ! The treatment is very drastic ; there is not only the operation, but his foot will have to be kept in plaster of Paris till the bones knit again. And—there may be the terrible disappointment at the end. I did not dare urge it upon Ulick : it is such a risk : but I am glad he will take it. It is worth the risk.”

Light and shade passed over Lady Turloughmore’s face with the rapidity of sun and cloud as they ruffle a meadow. She concluded on a lightening of the expression.

“ After all, God is good,” she said. “ God is very good. I could not have lived my life at all if I had not felt so convinced of the goodness of God.”

Miss Roche came in, dressed in her eccentric travelling clothes, and was told the news.

“ I knew Ulick would face it,” she said. “ I knew Ulick would face it. He will be one of Dr. Kellner’s famous cases. You shall see, Shelagh, you shall see. He made up his mind quickly : ” she sent a queer glance at Meg from under her eyelids, between which the eyes narrowed themselves to mere slits : “ I heard you playing and singing last

night, Miss Hildebrand, and I in my beauty-sleep."

Lady Turloughmore took no notice of Miss Roche's apparently irrelevant remark.

"He is eager to be off. He has telegraphed for Dr. Dwyer to meet him in Dublin the day after to-morrow. Dr. Dwyer will see after him. He was eager to go by himself, but he accepts Dr. Dwyer to lessen my anxieties. Fortunately he likes him. He would certainly need some one to travel back with him if he is to be in plaster of Paris. He will have to travel very carefully."

"He'll lose the hunting next winter." Again Miss Roche's eyes darted brightly at Meg and were hidden again. "We'll be put to the pin of our collar, as the saying is, to amuse him when he comes back. I think the Lord meant him to get well, for he has never yet attained to that resignation which is the hardest thing to look on at in any one that suffers. As long as there's discontent there is hope."

"Poor Ulick!" said the mother, softly. "I am sure he was very patient. I've found it hard to forgive myself, when I've had to look at him in pain and he built for strength. That was the saddest part of it."

"Indeed then the Lord won't find it hard to forgive you, a good little valiant woman if ever

there was one. I'm not saying Ulick wasn't patient. He chafed. Bless my heart, I don't want him to be patient, with a foot like that. I want him to be impatient and to get well like other men. I want to see him married, with a houseful of children, before I die."

Again the swift glance darted and was withdrawn. Lady Turloughmore sighed.

" Algy Rosse is a very pretty fellow, and a nice, pleasant lad," said Miss Roche : " but all the same we don't want to see him in Ulick's shoes. Not but what I'll be at rest with my fathers long before that. I'd like to see Ulick married before I die. I'm as fond of him as if he was my son. Why wouldn't he marry ? Lots of girls would jump at him, just as he is. Not because he is Lord Erris. There is something about him. Bless you, there are some men that attract women and some men that don't. I know, though I'm an old maid. What do you say, Miss Hildebrand ? "

Meg coloured, and her eyes were shy under the long lashes.

" There ! " said Miss Roche. " It isn't a fair question to ask a girl. Ulick would be little obliged to me for discussing his most private affairs. Well, I've plenty to do to get my old house any way habitable. I wish I could sell it and live in a cottage. It's terrible the way the big houses go to



rack and ruin in this country. I don't suppose I should like to sell it after all."

"Why not let some one else do the cleaning up for you if you won't have any servants, and stay here while it is done?" said Lady Turloughmore, kindly.

"Oh, indeed, it's not so much cleaning I'll do. It's only to keep a room or two habitable. I don't see myself letting loose a lot of dirty streels on Carrick. Thanks be to you, I've had a fine long holiday, and feel myself fit for anything. If poor Rattler hadn't died I couldn't have gone. Animals are a terrible tie."

"You'll want another dog," Lady Turloughmore suggested.

"I don't feel like it. If I take one it will be a village cur. Sure their hearts are right, the creatures, if their tails are wrong. Your sort of dog would look down on me and my queer ways. Rattler, being a fox-hound and brought up in the kennels, didn't know how a house ought to be."

She finished breakfast and went off, refusing Lady Turloughmore's offer of a carriage to take herself and her queer belongings. The trunk, which had come out of the ark, she would send a donkey-cart for. She insisted on carrying all manner of queer odds and ends, and did not refuse Meg's offer to walk with her as far as Carrick, though she insisted on bearing her share of the burdens.

"I won't ask you in," she said, when they reached the house. "The place wouldn't be fit to receive you. The last time I was away a water-pipe burst and destroyed I don't know how many things on me. The carpets were rotten with the damp. You never know what will happen in those old houses as soon as your back's turned. They're crumbling like their owners—that's what they are."

Meg set down the crazy band-box, the reticule, the brown-paper parcel full of all sorts of odds and ends, the cuckoo clock, which had been her share of the burden. She looked up at the house front streaked with damp, the unblinded, unshuttered windows staring at them like eyeless sockets: and in the beautiful June day she shivered.

"I wish you would let me stay," she said. "It seems so lonely for you. I could help you to get straight. I really love housework."

"In a nice clean house. Things have been allowed to go too long at Carrick. It would break your heart, so it would. You don't suppose I like to live in all the dirt and decay. My father kept twenty servants, to say nothing of hangers-on. It was a very different place in his time. Good-bye."

She whisked round the corner of the house, carrying a certain proportion of the things they had brought between them, and returned to find Meg still

standing where she had left her, contemplating the sad house-front.

“ I wouldn’t know what to do with the likes of you at all,” she said humorously. “ Go back now, and give my love to Shelagh Turloughmore, and tell her not to fret for her boy, that he’ll come home as well as anybody. And listen, now—don’t be coming over or sending messages, for I’ve got a working fit on me and I’m going to put the place in order. Tell Shelagh that from me—to let me alone till I come or send. And listen, now, child, if you were to send Ulick away heartened up and lively it might be doing him a power of good. Do you think you could do it, dear ? ”

There was something of a painful anxiety in Miss Anastasia’s face and voice as she leant a little closer to Meg, speaking in a whisper.

Apparently what she saw in Meg’s face satisfied her, for she did not wait for an answer.

“ Never mind me,” she went on, “ never mind me, child. I’ve known the boy from a baby and I know he’s worth all you could give him, even if he drags a lame foot after him all his days. Don’t I know ? Well, God bless you, my dear.”

And so saying she disappeared finally.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A KISS

MISS ROCHE's words threw Meg's mind into a strange confusion. It recalled her troubles of the night when she had remembered that she was specially commended to Lady Turloughmore because of the discretion in her which would make her observe the proper attitude towards Lord Erris. At the time her godmother's words had passed her by—what had she, Meg Hildebrand, to do with the girl who would use her position to make eyes at the heir? But since she had been at home a speech of her father's had made her wince.

“It isn't altogether what I'd choose for my girl,” he had said. “The poor afflicted lad! He hasn't been making love to you, has he, Meg? If he was that sort I'd be against your going back there. The likes of him are often terribly ready to fall in love and terribly troublesome when they're in it. There was one of the Alexanders was a dummy, and the poor fellow fell terribly in love with a young cousin of his own who was just kind to him out of



pity. That was a tragedy, if you like. You know the kind of jealous, suspicious tempers the likes of them are apt to have. You'll have to be careful with Lord Erris."

"He's not a bit queer, Papa, in any way, except his poor foot," Meg had interrupted. She felt badly jarred by her father's speech. "I wish you wouldn't go on thinking he is wrong in his head. He's absolutely normal, just as normal as you or I."

"I'm glad to hear it, for his mother's sake, poor thing," Terence Hildebrand had said amicably. "It's more than you'd look for, considering everything. They did say that some of the Earls of Turloughmore needn't have died—that it wasn't altogether the old woman's curse. It was always brought in accidental. Dear me—what am I saying at all? Here I am gossiping, like the worst old woman of them all. And nothing but hearsay, nothing but hearsay. To be sure I can trust my girl to be kind and prudent."

Why did they all trust her discretion? It had been the same with the Archduchess who had given her credit for the utmost good sense in the matter of the white-and-gold hussar. Meg had accepted the Archduchess's praise without blinking. She had had no temptation to be otherwise than discreet. Now she wondered to herself whether she would have merited the Archduchess's commendations if

Count Fritz Von Thal, that glittering creature, had appealed to her as Lord Erris appealed.

The Count had been honest enough. He had been genuinely in love with tall Meg, with her virginal air, her elusive grace, her beautiful eyes. Only, there had been a story whispered in Meg's ears by a music-mistress. Meg had had a predecessor as English governess to the children of the Archduchess. The young lady had allowed herself to be drawn into a surreptitious love-affair with a lieutenant of the army, dazzling to her middle-class eyes, although his allowance represented about eighty pounds of our money yearly. She had been sent home to England practically in disgrace. An innocent, foolish creature, she had been treated as of the sinning. It had made Meg feel a little sick to think upon it. The tale had given her a *grue*, recurring at the moments of the Archduchess's greatest sweetness, making her quiet for an instant. She might have been that poor wretch if she had been dazzled by the Count Fritz Von Thal. To be sent home in disgrace, as though one were shameful, because of a girlish sentimentality! The horror of it had perhaps affected Meg's attitude of mind towards Fritz Von Thal. It would have been all the same to the Archduchess, although Meg was descended from a family which had always been gentle, and Miss Bryant, that child of calamity, had

a papa who was a draper's manager. From her height the Archduchess regarded with a serene indifference as to precedence all who were not her equals. She expected her children's governesses to be ladies, as a matter of course. Beyond that she did not look.

Now, walking down the road from Carrick, Meg asked herself for the first time whether, if she had been attracted by Fritz Von Thal she would have been more discreet than Miss Bryant. Hitherto it had not occurred to her to doubt it.

Perhaps—was it in Lady Turloughmore to look coldly at a girl who had been indiscreet, who had failed in the trust reposed in her? She was so sweet to Meg. But then the Archduchess was sweetness itself, a fact which had made her attitude towards little Miss Bryant the more appalling. To be sure Meg's family tree would tell with the Turloughmores whereas it would have been merely incomprehensible to the Archduchess. There had been something about the Dowager, something which had made Meg's heart flutter and tremble. Perhaps it was only in her imagination; in her wishes. The Earls of Turloughmore mated with their equals for all that there was a doom upon them.

The sounds of a horse's hoofs cantering along the grassy stretch by the wayside had not reached her ears. She looked up startled as the horse's head drew almost level with her.



“ Oh, it is you,” she said, recognising Lord Erris.

“ May I walk my horse with you ? ” he asked.

“ If I am not interrupting your ride.”

“ I was on my homeward way. You will excuse my not walking with you.”

“ Oh yes, yes ! ” she answered hurriedly, so as to avert any painful explanations.

“ Perhaps—when Dr. Kellner has had a go at me I may be able to walk with you like any other man.”

She turned her bright look on him, and put up her hand to pat his horse's neck.

“ You will have to be very patient and very brave,” she said softly, remembering what Miss Roche had said.

“ I know. Not for the operation. It is nothing. I have always been used to pain. People who have not had much pain find it harder to bear. There will be the long inaction—the plaster of Paris. I am not so easy as I ought to be. It will be hard, but not so hard as it would be to people who lead an active life. It will be perhaps easier to bear if you will sing to me sometimes when I come home.”

Walking along, keeping pace with the horse, she looked up at him, throwing back her shining head so that her gaze should be level with his.

“ That will be very easy to do,” she said, not knowing how much assurance there was in her eyes.



They were in a part of the road overhung by trees, almost a woodland road, the one well-wooded bit of country for miles around. The afternoon was sultry, but there was no such haze of heat as there would have been in England. The distant hills stood clear and shining against a sky which had an almost hard brilliancy. So clear was the air between that one seemed to look through crystal or shining water rather than air. Little streams laughed and tinkled by the roadside. The wood-pigeons uttered their drowsy, satisfied call. The birds were quiet. They were singing less now except on afternoons and evenings.

“When next I come this way,” he said, “I shall be like other men, or I shall be worse than I was before.”

“You will be like other men,” she said.

“So far as I may be,” he replied.

She turned about, moved by a sudden impulse, and fell back a little so that she walked beside him rather than a little in advance of him.

“Would nothing put it out of your head,” she said, “that you are not like other men, apart from the thing which Dr. Kellner is going to set right? Forgive me! I don’t know why I dare to touch on such things.” The colour flamed in her cheeks, but she was too intent on the thing she had to say to be silent. “Can’t you trust the good God for

yourself and those to come after you? Cannot you believe that the doom is a superstition and a delusion? ”

He stared at her as though she fascinated him. With her parted lips, her fresh wild colour, the agitation which made her bosom lift and fall and her eyes soft, she was indeed alluring.

“ The superstition has been very persistent,” he said, looking down at her. “ I know what you would say—that we gave the superstition its power. Well—perhaps if I were not sickly, perhaps even yet, if Dr. Kellner can mend this lame foot of mine, I might have the courage to set the superstition at naught. My fathers before me were not sickly. They had the courage. They loved women and gave hostages to fortune. There were women as brave as you, as daring, because they loved—look at my mother! Not one of them received the reward of her courage.”

He averted his eyes from her face.

“ I have sworn to myself that I would be the one to end it,” he said. “ I have striven to bring Algy Rosse to a sense of his responsibilities when he shall be master here. To do Algy justice the prospect has not seemed to elate him. He has refused to believe that I shall not marry.”

She wanted to answer him, to say something, but she had no words. She looked straight before her

down the green road, noting how a squirrel ran nimbly along a branch and swung himself along another bough back into the heart of green darkness that was the tree.

“ I don’t know what I should do,” he said quietly, “ if a woman I loved were willing to take the risk for me. I used to say that I would not accept it. I have led the life of a hermit, perhaps because I was not so sure of myself as I thought. I was very sure of myself till—these last few weeks.”

She found words at last ; but they drew away from the things he had been saying.

“ I love Lady Turloughmore,” she said simply. “ Even if you should marry some day—even if you stood up, as I think you ought to do, and resolved to fight the terror that flieth by night, still she would be afraid. Dear soul, she would be afraid as long as she lived. I would do anything in the world to deliver her from that terror.”

“ There would be only one way,” he said quietly, “ and that would be if an Earl of Turloughmore should die in his bed. We have no means of proving my father’s death, although we shall have to presume it presently if proof is not forthcoming. There are hard business reasons why his place should not remain empty. It would not help her if I were to die in my bed, else perhaps it might be managed.”



She could have cried out at the cruelty of it. What change had come over the golden morning? The sun had gone behind the cloud and it was cold in the shadow of the trees. She turned her face to his in a piteous, dumb protest.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I am a brute to hurt you. Your eyes are very candid. They cry out on me. I make no excuse for myself. You see how unwise it is to care for us even as friends. We have power to hurt our friends. Think how much worse it is for ourselves.”

He was watching her profile with strange intentness. She was hatless and from his seat on horseback he could see how her hair waved away from the parting in delicate waves and curls that were full of hidden light. The small, pure, pale profile, the delicate lifted brow, the whiteness of the neck below the abundant hair, all seemed to move him poignantly.

“If one of us were to die in his bed,” he repeated. “That must break the doom for all of us. You don’t know what it is to be born to it: to know that every one expects it of us. It takes the courage out of a man, I can tell you. Horrible, to know that it is expected of you. I will tell you something, Miss Hildebrand, which I would not tell every one.”

He checked his horse, which came to a standstill



and stood eating the grass by the side of the road. She looked up at him, expectant, her breath coming faster.

“ I believe,” he said deliberately, “ that some of my ancestors died violent deaths, not so much by accident as by design, their own design. Such a thing may be forced on you if you believe it is bound to come. Some day you are cleaning a revolver, walking on a cliff, climbing a mountain, sharpening a razor ; it might come upon you irresistibly that the thing was bound to happen ; and it happens. Coroners’ juries often err on the side of mercy, especially if the subject of the inquest has been in life a popular person : and we have nearly always been popular. Do you suppose that any of my tenants would bring in a verdict of *felo de se* against me ? ”

She cried out sharply, and stood looking up at him, panting, red and white, as though he had struck her.

“ Oh, you should not,” she began, with a sound like a sob.

He let the reins drop on his horse’s neck, and, leaning towards her, while a dark flush rose in his cheeks, he took the cool, pure face between his hands.

“ You see what I have to fight against for myself as well as for you,” he said, with a heart-breaking

tenderness. “ My dear, my dear—do you know that I have never kissed a woman’s lips yet ? ”

With a motion so slight as to seem almost unconscious she lifted her face a little way towards him, and their lips met. Then he released her, gathered up his horse’s reins, and was gone.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE OTHER WOMAN

It was characteristic of Meg that the kiss which passed between her and Lord Erris seemed to her as solemn as a bethrothal. Nothing more was said between them. He avoided her while he stayed, and in a few hours he was gone.

For some days after his departure her mood of exaltation lasted. She said to herself in a passion of generous folly that she would not have chosen a happier love if she could, thanking God in her happy thoughts, that it was given to her to carry a burden not her own. Her heart ran on before to take up the sorrowful years that were to come, eager to accept whatever of suffering they brought, so that she might lighten the weight on the bowed shoulders that had borne it so long.

She accepted all that might be. Times were when looking down the vista of the years she saw them under a golden haze. If one were in the hands of God, she said over and over to herself, there would

be nothing to fear. Nothing could befall them of dread and terror too great to be borne.

She came tumbling down from her mood of exaltation with a suddenness that left her breathless and spent. She was driving with Lady Turloughmore. The intimacy between them had made steady progress. Meg, who had the imaginative girl's capacity for devotion to an elder woman, with a profound and tender pity added, had reached the stage of adoring Lady Turloughmore. It was a thousand times better than the Archduchess, who was a star and dwelt apart. There was a sympathy between her and Lady Turloughmore. Meg began to find that their thoughts were often on the same subject. When she expressed a thought or a feeling, and there were days when she felt much, when thoughts so thronged her brain that if she had been an artist she must have expressed herself in poetry or music—Lady Turloughmore would turn her beautiful faded eyes upon her, with: "Strange: I was thinking somewhat the same."

"How excellently you suit me, Meg!" she said on this day of quiet, golden calm, when the sea crooned to itself like an old nurse, hushing the earth on its sleepy bosom. "You remind me of the pigeon that flew in that night. You and the dove have brought peace. You have helped me through these sorrowful months. I always feel that you



understand me, dear child, even when you are silent. As you sit there beside me I have a feeling of your answering me in some way—deep calling to deep.”

“I am so glad,” Meg said, with her ready blush and shyness. “I have not had many devotions, Lady Turloughmore.”

She said no more. The hiatus was more eloquent than words.

Lady Turloughmore smiled, and laid her hand over the girl's. It was a thin hand, blue-veined and over-white, and the wedding-ring on the third finger needed a guard to keep it in its place.

“Dear child !” she said. “Dear child !”

She was a woman who could be exquisitely tender ; who could make her tenderness felt like a benediction.

“We all love you,” she went on. “You have made a difference to us all. Even Prince loves you, and Prince is slow to make friends. The servants are devoted to you. My son—I have not seen him so normal since Eileen left us. That was a trial. He let Eileen go without speaking. Since then he has made up his mind not to marry. My dear, that was a very sad disappointment for me.”

Down went Meg's heart like a plummet. A sense of the most profound calamity and sadness enveloped her.

“ You are like Eileen, only she is fairer than you. My son noticed it the first time he saw you. You walk like her, only she is taller ; she is more than common tall. She cries out on her own beautiful height. You must see her one of these days. She is most fascinating.”

For the life of her Meg could not have asked who Eileen was, this girl of the beautiful height, of whom she had not heard five minutes ago, the mere mention of whom had laid her castles in ruins.

“ One of these days you shall see Eileen,” Lady Turloughmore went on, as though the repetition of the name were pleasant to her. “ I do not talk of her when Ulick is here, lest it grieve him. She is so unspoilt, although, her father being Ambassador, she has gone everywhere and met everybody. She loves Castle Eagle. If Ulick would only have spoken ! He would not. He would not see that Eileen might have thought it worth while. It was after she was here that he said he would never marry. He was so different while she stayed.”

So that was why Lord Erris had kissed her—because she reminded him irresistibly of the girl he had loved so much that he would not shadow her brightness with the darkness of his own fate. Being young Meg was very quick to rush on the thorns, to press them into her breast.

“ Perhaps,” she said, in a voice that sounded

small and cold to her own ears—"perhaps it would make a difference if the operation should prove successful."

She wondered if Lady Turloughmore would notice anything amiss in her tone. Apparently Lady Turloughmore did not, for she went on, with her usual, quiet placidity of manner—

"That is my dearest hope. Poor Ulick—if you saw her, the charming creature, you would understand how hard it was for the boy to resist her! He has not spoken of her to you? You are such friends."

"He has not spoken of her."

As she said it she was conscious of an amazed bewilderment. How was it possible that, after a four months' residence at Castle Eagle, during which every day had seemed to draw her into closer intimacy with the family, she had never heard of this Eileen who had started up to push her from her stool. After all, she knew nothing of their friends—less than nothing. Except for the few neighbours who had called on Lady Turloughmore since her trouble she had no idea of who their friends might be. People like them were bound to have many friends and connections. From her state of well-being she dropped to a dreary estimate of herself. She was next to nothing in their lives, next to nothing. Lord Erris's ways with her, those looks, the memory of



which had filled her with a passionate delight, had been hers—because she was like Eileen.

Later in the afternoon—she had been writing letters for Lady Turloughmore and had just finished and stamped a little pile—she had a revelation. The room had many portraits in water-colours in pastel and one in oil of a beautiful little girl—Lady Turloughmore's little daughter, Cicely. There was also a large photograph in a silver frame of a girl wearing court-dress. Meg had glanced at it one day with a passing wonder at the girl's height and grace. That must be—Eileen.

The photograph stood on an old escritoire of satinwood delicately inlaid.

“That is——” she said.

“Yes, that is Eileen—Miss Trant. Her father is Lord de Sales. Perhaps you may see her this summer. I shall ask her to come if Dr. Kellner thinks it necessary to keep my son under his immediate supervision till the foot comes out of plaster of Paris.”

“I did not know there was a question of that.”

“I have had a letter from Ulick. He thinks it very likely. After all, it is a risk to come home. Why should he do it? He will find the days hang less heavily on his hands when winter comes there than here. He would miss his hunting. And there are so many days of winter here when any kind of



outdoor life is impossible for the wind and the rain.

The wind and the rain. Meg felt as though the storm dashed in her face. She said to herself that before Lord Erris came home cured she would be back at Crane's Nest. Later, in the watches of the night, when sleep seemed to have forsaken her, that thought of running away after all her exaltation, her high resolves, showed itself to her as a cowardly one. If but Castle Eagle could be from under the shadows—if ever it could be from under the shadows—she could go then, without any sense of cowardice, of forsaking her post. "A soldier never forsakes his post," Terence Hildebrand had been wont to say, inculcating one of the very few rules of conduct he thought necessary upon his children. "A soldier never forsakes his post." It was a reminiscence of his young and splendid days of soldiering in a crack regiment, of which there were few enough now in the tall, grey shabby gentleman. It was a rule good enough for his children.

The pigeon, which had hopped from the fender stool to a chair, on to a table, and finally to Lady Turloughmore's shoulder, cooed contentedly.

"Tom grows too daring," said Lady Turloughmore. "We must be careful of him, Meg. If anything were to happen to him what should I do?" She smiled her wistful, patient smile. "I know he is only

somebody's pet escaped and flown in here out of the storm. Yet he seemed to bring me assurance of the Mercy of God to me and mine. Coming when he did he might perhaps have been a raven. But he is a dove—a messenger of peace.”

“We shall have to watch him,” Meg said, taking up something and laying it down again. “I don’t think he will ever fly again. His wing must have been injured when he was blown against the pane that night. But he hops everywhere he will. Kate tells me that he attacks the farmyard fowl and drives them before him. A triumph of mind over matter. He has a great character.”

“We must keep him out of danger,” said Lady Turloughmore, still faintly smiling, as though she mocked herself. “He is my sheet anchor. If I were to lose him I do not know what I should do. An ordinary pigeon ! I call him a dove ; a dove is more than a pigeon.”

The pigeon by this time had taken to accompanying Lady Turloughmore everywhere. He hopped up and downstairs after her like her dog, and the dogs had learnt to bear with him as a privileged thing, even Prince yielding him his pride of place with an air of grave understanding. Tom had been well taken care of in the absence of the family, and he had been the first to welcome Lady Turloughmore on her return.

“ I’m glad ’tis a pigeon, not a crow,” Miss Roche had said. “ If ’twas to be a crow or anything black I couldn’t abide it. ’Tis too cute for anything. In the old days they’d have said it was a familiar spirit, so they would.”

“ If any one could take Lady Turloughmore for a witch,” Meg had responded, “ it would be easy to accept Tom as a familiar spirit.”

“ There you have me, Miss Hildebrand. Even the world’s not wicked enough for that. If it was me now with my old witch’s face ! Isn’t it touching to see her, the creature, bearing her sorrow as she does and picking up all the little grains of comfort along her way. She’s one of those—I can’t understand them myself—that find flowers of faith, hope, and charity in the stoniest road. I believe that bird’s a comfort to her. I know you are, Miss Hildebrand. ’Tis lonesome enough for a girl like you at Castle Eagle. For your sake I wish Carrick was what it used to be, before we ran through all we had and more.”

She looked curiously at Meg.

“ D’ye think,” she said, “ that she believes Turloughmore’s drowned in the yacht, at all, at all ? Or has she some delusion that he’ll come back ? Sure if it was a delusion itself I wouldn’t grudge it to her. It might be Somebody’s way of tempering the wind to the shorn lamb, as that old blackguard



Sterne puts it? He was a fine preacher morebe-token. I'd lend you his sermons if I hadn't lost them in the confusion of the place. What at all is she thinking about Turloughmore? "

" Perhaps she doesn't think. Perhaps the shock she has had has mercifully blunted the edges of thinking for the present. Perhaps she will not be allowed to think till she is better fitted for it."

" Ah, you believe that? Why then, it would be a mercy to the creature. Such mercies are commoner than people think. You've never had a knock-down blow yourself, child: you're too young for it. But if the time comes that you have such a thing—and, sure, seeing how the world's made you may expect it unless you were to die young, and I wouldn't like to be thinking of that—you'll be wondering at yourself that's taking it so hard-hearted and not caring at all, while all the time it's only Somebody's mercy, blunting the sharp edge of misfortune for you."

She looked away from Meg half shyly. They were standing in the long dining-room at Carrick. Meg had come with a message from Lady Turloughmore, and had delivered it in the beautiful Eighteenth Century room with its magnificent windows from floor to ceiling, and its carved mantel-pieces inlaid with coloured marbles, beautiful despite the decay that lay on everything.



“If I was to be gone to-morrow,” said Miss Roche, her hand resting on the fine old mahogany table on which the wine had travelled in silver coasters and the fruit had made contrasts of colour in the good years, “if I was to be gone to-morrow there wouldn’t be any one to miss me, not even a dog now Rattler’s dead. Yet I remember many a one sitting to this board who’d have fretted sorely if I was to be taken. I ought to be glad I’m the last left so there’s none to suffer: but sometimes it’s desolate.”

She blinked away something that might have been a tear, and her mood changed. She cast a whimsical eye up at the ceiling with its rose of fine gilt and painted stucco-work encircling the hook from which the chandelier, splendid despite its dimness, was suspended.

“A bit of that fell down last night,” she said. “I thought ’twas all coming. It’ll last my time. Anyhow there’s no fear it’ll kill any one now if it was to come down itself. Not like the time when old Lady Sabina had the accident. Did you ever hear tell of it?”

“I don’t think I did.”

“Well, I’ll tell you now. She was my great-great-aunt. My great-great-uncle Felix used to entertain his friends largely in those days, and Lady Sabina didn’t like at all to hear no more of the

stories they were telling after dinner than the roars of laughter that came to her, even as far away as the drawing-room. She had her own little room above this. I'll show it to you sometime. It's worth looking at even yet. Well, she had a couple of the boards of the flooring taken up and left loose, just covered with a sofa : and as soon as the fun began she could push away the sofa and lift the boards ; she had two holes pierced just in the middle of the rose, and she could see and hear as well as anybody. One night she had an accident. She was laughing so much at a story of Councillor O'Flaherty's that she forgot herself altogether and tumbled into the hole, nearly bringing down the ceiling. Bits of it came down anyhow, and the table was destroyed, and the wine full of bits of plaster, and the gentlemen as white as millers. They jumped away to the walls and began brushing themselves, and using language and staring at some object above in the ceiling that had done all the mischief and was making the queerest gyrations you ever saw up there in the middle of the rose. ' It's the divil himself,' said the Councillor, who hated to be interrupted in the middle of a story. ' If it isn't the divil, what is it ? ' asked Sir Andrew O'Hara, who had three bottles of port out of his allowance of six under his belt. ' Arrah, whisht, gentlemen,' said Tim Bracken, the butler, the only one who had his wits properly about him. ' Don't

be sayin' things yez'll be sorry for afterwards. Sure, glory be to goodness, isn't it the Dowager's leg ? ' And sure enough, it was ; and a leg that had turned many a fine fellow's head by all accounts in its time."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE GOLDEN YOUTH

As the days passed Meg became more than ever convinced that some merciful dulness lay upon Lady Turloughmore's grief, which was not forgotten but only quiescent. She went nowhere and received no one in the weeks that intervened between her son's going away and the coming of Algernon Rosse, for whom Meg had conceived a dislike beforehand, writing him down in her own mind as a *petit maître*, imagining him small-handed, small-footed, exquisitely tailored: just such a barber's block of a man as she abhorred.

Lady Turloughmore had not again referred to Miss Trant; but some time in the week preceding Mr. Rosse's arrival she looked up from her letters at the breakfast-table to say—

“Eileen will be with us by the first of July. She will take the burden of entertaining Algy off my shoulders. She comes for that, dear girl. Somehow this year it seems too much for me to do, though I am fond of Algy.”



Meg wanted to hear more about Miss Trant, but she felt it impossible to ask ; and presently Lady Turloughmore collected her letters and, asking to be excused, glided away from the table, smiling her faint smile. The pigeon, which had been perching on the back of her chair, hopped sedately from the back to the seat of the chair on to the floor and followed her in a succession of dainty little half-flights. He had injured a claw as well as a wing the night he had been blown in from the storm, and he would never fly or walk like his fellows ; but he seemed quite unaware of any deprivation as he hopped in his mistress's train while the jealous dogs made way for him.

She heard something from Kate in a day or two. Kate waxed communicative in the act of brushing Miss Hildebrand's hair ; it had to be conceded that Kate's communicativeness seldom or never over-stepped the line of good feeling and good manners.

" It'll be livelier for ye, Miss, when Mr. Rosse comes. I never seen such a young gentleman for lovely clothes. Sure the things he does be wearin' inside an' his pyjamas that he goes to sleep in, is so lovely that you might wear them on you for a ball. 'Tis a shame to be coverin' them up, that's what I say. An' the little things he does have in his boots—threes he calls them : I was fair bothered the first

time he axed me for his threes. 'I saw no more than two of thim, sir,' says I. He has a rigiment o' boots; an' the threes in pairs do be sittin' in thim like pigs in a pound. He's a very pleasant-spoken young gentleman, though maybe a bit too fine in his ways. But sure it does you good to look at him all the same: for 'tis like lookin' into a world where no hardships is nor ever could be. You'd never think his Lordship an' him were cousins."

"No?" said Meg, looking at her reflection in the glass and wondering if it was the candles flaring in the wind that cast the dark shadows over her face and made her eyes mournful.

"'Twill be good for yourself," said Kate, as though she had surprised the thought, "to have somethin' young and cheerful in the house wid you. It's been castin' its shadows over you, so it has. 'Tis the sorrowful time we've been havin' since ye come. Before the last time th' Earl went away her Ladyship was as cheerful as ye'd wish to see her; an' you couldn't tell be the house that there was any trouble on it at all. I think we wor forgettin' the trouble an' thinkin' it was gone out of it entirely—an' it only waitin' round the corner to spring out on us unawares."

She lifted a heavy piece of Meg's hair, brushed it and let it fall again in its place, before resuming her speech.

“ If I was you, Miss Hildebran’,” she said, “ whin Mr. Rosse comes and Miss Trant, I’d just be forgettin’ ’twas a house of mournin’ at all an’ enjoy myself a bit. It won’t do her Ladyship any good to be keepin’ up the misery. I think myself she does be hopin’ agin hope that he’ll come home safe. The Lord return her son to her safe and well ! ”

Meg turned a startled face on Kate so suddenly that the stroke of the brush intended for her hair fell upon her ear instead.

“ Why, what would happen to him ? ” she asked. “ It isn’t an operation that threatens life. What would happen to him ? ”

“ Sure there’s no sayin’. If he wasn’t who he is you needn’t trouble about him at all. There’s no knowin’ wid our family. Isn’t it a quare thing to see her Ladyship delightin’ herself wid that bird, the impident thing ? He’ll come to harm yet, so he will, with the impidence of him to them that was in the place before ever he came from the Lord knows where.”

“ I hope he won’t come to harm,” said Meg, earnestly, “ for to tell you the truth, Kate, I believe he’s a cause of great hope and comfort to poor Lady Turloughmore. It was strange, if you’ll think of it, his flying in like that out of the storm.”

“ I’m not sayin’ it wasn’t quare,” said Kate :



“for the matter o’ that the world’s full o’ quare things elbowin’ and shovin’ aich other. I’ve seen so many myself in my time, an’ I’m no ould maid yet, that I wonder at the foolishness o’ people that won’t listen to a thing they haven’t got the hang of. It’s true for you about her Ladyship and the ould pigeon. If I see a stray cat as much as shovin’ her nose in the place I’ll give her a welcome ’ll surprise her.”

Out of this conversation arose a development of that capacity for self-sacrifice which is inherent in the female breast.

“We all thought it would be a match between his Lordship and Miss Trant,” Kate had said, lifting the long strands of Meg’s hair and brushing them singly in the way that is soothing to tired nerves and aching head. “She seemed just the sort o’ lady to take him out of himself. Sure what’s a lame foot to keep a gentleman at home all his life? I wance knew a man sat in a bowl because he’d no legs, and he’d make you clothes-pegs beautiful. She’s the lovely crathur is Miss Trant. Not but what there’s some as lovely if they haven’t got the beautiful clothes itself.”

From Kate’s irrelevances Meg deduced more than from what Lady Turloughmore had said, a whole theory of an unrequited love on Lord Erris’s part for the beautiful Miss Trant. He must have felt



the contrast of his own shadowed life with the brilliant and beautiful creature who came into it from the outside world. A word here, a hint there, built up her picture of Miss Trant.

"She's a glorious creature," said Mr. Algernon Rosse, as he walked by Meg's side one morning a week or so later. "Poor Erris was hard hit. He couldn't help it. She was adorably kind."

Young, beautiful, kind. Meg's heart began to bleed for the shadowed life which had had to relinquish these things.

"Erris has such a poor conceit of himself," went on the golden youth. "Of course—it would be a sacrifice—especially as he broods on the misfortunes that have attended on the family. Do you believe in them, Miss Hildebrand? The misfortunes, I mean."

Meg shook her head.

"I suppose you think there's no use denyin' them," said Algy Rosse, who dropped his final g's—"especially with the last experience fresh in your mind. I believe it when I'm here and I don't believe it when I get away. There's something in the bally air—I beg your pardon, Miss Hildebrand—I mean the Irish atmosphere."

"Oh, I don't mind your saying 'bally,'" said Meg. "It's rather refreshing in this house." She looked at his clean, pink, wholesome face. "Why

don't you come here more, Mr. Rosse? You'd be a cheerful influence, especially as your cousins are very fond of you. I can't imagine you and superstition in the same house."

"Now, can't you? That's awfully good of you, to have thought about me, I mean. Why don't I come here more? Well—I don't know. I love the place. I always thought everything about it just rippin'. But—Erris can't do the things I do. He's too beastly unselfish to let me be tied to his armchair: and I've heard Cousin Shelagh sigh, when I was jumpin' over the backs of chairs to work off some of the bottled-up spirits. It's a shame when a fellow's as strong as Erris is if it wasn't for the confounded stupidity of that foot of his. Did you ever feel his grip. Of course you didn't, but it's like iron. I'll tell you what, Miss Hildebrand, if Erris comes back cured we must do something to take him out of himself. We must fight the family bogey between us, somehow."

Mr. Rosse was two days at Castle Eagle, and already Meg felt as though she had known him for years. He had come with an easy brightness into the life. There were a hundred minute differences, which Lady Turloughmore would never have observed, patent to Meg. There was a new alertness in the whole establishment. Everybody, from Mrs. Browne down to the youngest gardener's helper,

seemed bucked up by the coming of Algy Rosse. Meg, accustomed to a greater easiness of life than prevailed at Castle Eagle, had found nothing amiss in the running of that establishment. Now she discovered that the cook had put on an additional spurt of endeavour: that Bates the gardener was ready to cut his best blooms, and to sacrifice his prize fruit and vegetables for Mr. Rosse's delectation. The horses in the stables were ridden by some one else than grooms and stable-boys: the carriages were in constant requisition. She began to realise that Castle Eagle, before the coming of Algy Rosse, had been somewhat of a palace of the Sleeping Beauty: that the family had existed for its servants rather than its servants for it—by the contrast that followed on the arrival of the heir-presumptive.

If he had been less debonair, less pleasant and simple, less attached to his relatives, Meg felt that she could hardly have forgiven him because every one smiled on his coming. This gay, insouciant boy was a poignant contrast to the man with whom pain had so long been an inhabitant that he could have little joy of his youth.

One person only refused to smile upon Algy Rosse. That was Julia, who pretended not to know him when he went to visit her in the nurseries, where she kept the house now all kinds of



weather, not even going forth to Mass on Sundays, because of the rheumatism that kept her on the rack.

She treated Algy Rosse as some one she had never seen before, to the amiable youth's discomfiture. Meg watched him while he sat in an atmosphere intolerable on a hot summer morning, trying to recall himself to Julia's memory and failing, so that at last he went away baffled.

Meg remained. She had discovered a certain resentment in Julia's manner, and thought it might be due to her having neglected the old woman of late, since Algy Rosse claimed much of her time, and Lady Turloughmore seemed to desire that she should fall in with his wishes.

"Did you not really remember Mr. Rosse?" she asked, when the door had closed behind the golden youth. "You have such a good memory for things in general."

"Ay, then, I remembered him well enough," said Julia, turning a far less friendly eye than usual upon Meg. "I call it just impidence of him puttin' his nose in here where he isn't wanted. Och, indeed, there's some that forget aisy, an' the risin' sun's better to some thin the settin' sun. But maybe the settin's farther away thin some people thinks. There was wan in this house—I h'ard it wid me own ears—that said the house was gayer wid Mr. Rosse in it



thin Lord Erris. It's gaiety some people wants, an' to stand in the sun an' let others sit in the darkness. But he needn't be stickin' his nose into my nurseries, where I hope I'll see his Lordship's childher before I die."

"No one forgets Lord Erris because Mr. Rosse is very pleasant, Julia," Meg said. "And I know that Mr. Rosse wouldn't want to push any one into the dark. He is deeply attached both to Lady Turloughmore and to Lord Erris."

The old woman looked up at her, with something in the expression of her purblind eyes that made Meg wonder what was coming.

"Your face is like crame and roses to me poor ould blind eyes," she said. "But it isn't the same as it was, jewel. 'Tis like as if it had got nipped by the frost. Listen, dear, you wouldn't be thinkin' there was a new light in the day because Mr. Rosse was come, and my poor lamb gone away out of it, to try to get his poor foot made as good as any beggar's foot that walks the road? You wouldn't now, would you?"

Meg, as though constrained by some power beyond herself, looked down into the old woman's eyes, but said nothing; and Julia, with a baffled air, went on—

"You needn't be ashamed or afraid of poor old Julia, darlint. The child of my milk, isn't he as dear

to me as if he was the child I bore? I couldn't bear to see any wrong done to him. If he was to be in love with a lady—and why wouldn't he be?—I wouldn't like to see any wrong done to him nor any one preferred before him. I'd like to give him the thing he wanted, you see, dear. That's the way with all of us women; whether we're poor or old mad women that's outlived our time or a beautiful young lady that's the desire of a man's eyes; we all want to give them all they want. Sure what is women for but to content the men? "

At the moment this abject and contemptible betrayal of her sex only struck an answering chord in Meg's bosom. Her eyes filled with tears as she stooped and set her fresh young lips to cheeks that felt like the texture of an old kid glove.

Whatever else Julia might have said she fled from hearing. It was something of a relief to all that was pent up in her heart to let it go for a moment before the eyes of the old half-mad woman who had nursed Lord Erris and his father before him. But after the momentary slackening of her bonds she fled, terrified of her self-betrayal.

In the quiet and shelter of her own room she stood, her hands clasped upon her breast as though she would keep down the tumult of her heart. What a simple creed it was, that immemorably old creed

of the women, to which she in her turn was ready to subscribe, that the man should be given all he wanted ! All he wanted ! Even though it broke the heart of the woman, the man should have all he wanted.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE NURSE-CHILD

“I’D be inclined myself,” said Algy Rosse, “to catch an Earl of Turloughmore and shut him up and make him die in his bed. That would put an end to the curse.”

“So it would,” said Meg, laughing. She found that Algy Rosse often made her laugh, took her out of herself into a certain impersonal pleasure and amusement. He was so neat, so clean, so shining; everything that belonged to him was so fresh and dainty. As Kate said, drawing Miss Hildebrand’s attention to the long row of Algy’s shoes and boots, with trees in them, his boots might have been blacked in Heaven, and his shirt fronts polished there, for in Kate’s experience no mortal hand had ever done these things so excellently.

They had modest picnics and little outings of one sort or another, but kept exclusively to themselves now that Miss Trant had come. Sometimes Lady Turloughmore joined the party: sometimes she let the young people go off together. She was



preoccupied with old Julia who had taken a chill and set up bad bronchitis. She was always at the old woman's beck and call, as though, said Kate, bitterly, there were not enough servants to wait on the old bag of bones, who never had a word of thanks for anybody, and was always ramblin' on about what girls were like when she was young, and the dirty, idle, careless ways they had contracted now that she was old. Kate should know how aggravating Julia was, since she had the attendance on the sick room and was assiduous in her care of the patient for all her grumbling.

Miss Trant's beauty had been something of a shock to poor Meg at first sight. She was so tall: her eyes were so beautiful: her voice was music itself: she had such an exquisite caressing way of looking at those she liked. She was beautifully although quietly dressed; above all she was simple. Her maid behaved as a much more important person, and with her English accent and her airs and graces picked up in Paris, to say nothing of a Parisian elegance in her garments, she fluttered the hearts of the men servants; setting the maids to indignant sniffs and wonderings as to what the world was coming too at all and the foolishness of men, and what they could see in that gazabo to be following her about.

Miss Trant increased the brightness Algy had

brought with him. She laughed at the golden youth, alternately snubbing and petting him. Algy declared that he could not fall in love with her—the declaration was private, for Meg's ear. With such beauty one always found coldness.

“ But for loving, why you would not, Sweet,  
Though one paid you,  
Flayed you, brayed you  
In a mortar, for you could not, Sweet,”

he quoted at the top of his happy young voice, going on to declare that if any girl loved him he simply could not resist her: that he was made like that: and looking at Meg with melting blue eyes which implored her to try the experiment.

At the first sight of Miss Trant, Meg felt that her dreams were at an end. What man who had loved such a goddess could decline on Meg Hildebrand? She adored beauty, and she found Miss Trant dreadfully complete and satisfying. There was not a jarring note in her, from her golden head to her delicate feet. One could hardly have said if she looked more beautiful in simplicity or splendour, in rustling silks or the linens and muslins which Meg suspected cost as much as the silks, so perfect was their simplicity.

Down went Meg's dreams toppling. Alone in her room she took her hand-glass and examined her face critically. How had anybody seen any resemblance

between herself and Lord de Sales' beautiful daughter? It had nothing at all to say to it that she lacked the adventitious aids which wealth could give to even such beauty as Miss Trant's.

She saw her face lightly freckled over its soft, pale tints : the eyes she had called liver-coloured, like Prince's ; the hair which had something of the same red in its tinge. She felt she looked jaded, dulled, and she had never had any beauty to spare. The dimples were smoothed out of her cheeks : her lips drooped. She laid back the glass again with a sigh. What did any one mean by comparing her with Miss Trant ?

There was a strong west wind blowing outside, and they were going on one of their expeditions. She put on her hat, tying it down with a little scarf of old lace which had belonged to her mother. She hardly cared that the lace became her, saying to herself that so she would wear it when the wrinkles came ; that it would soften the leanness of her neck and the shadows of her cheeks, dimming the lines about her eyes. It was part of her pleasure in pressing her breast upon a thorn that made her run on to meet her age. She would not care how soon age came if only luck came to the Turloughmores ; if she could think of those who had been good to her as happy without her ; above all if the happiness might come about through anything of her doing.



As though that were likely ; as though anything she could do would lift the doom from the family.

She began to see now why it was that Lord Erris was resigned to slipping out of life without handing on the burden of Biddy Pendergast's curse, allowing his mantle to fall on Algy Rosse's debonair shoulders.

Algy had expressed his own personal contempt for the cause, with a good common-sense behind the flippancy which prevented its jarring.

“ The thing would be to take an Earl of Turloughmore and lock him up and make him die in his bed of natural causes. But we can't very well try it on poor old Erris, can we, Miss Hildebrand ? ”

Fastening the lace about her head Meg somehow let fall an old turquoise ring of two hearts joined, which had belonged to her mother. It rolled out of sight beneath the bed. Down went Meg on her hands and knees searching for it. She could find it nowhere. It must have rolled under the carpet somewhere.

While she felt about near the wall she was startled by a sound like a cough close at hand. She listened and it was not repeated. It must have been fancy, she said to herself, as she emerged from under the bed to the empty room. Or a dog perhaps had made a sound outside the door which she had mistaken for a cough.

She put the matter out of her mind, and hurried



to join the others who were waiting for her downstairs. As she opened her door something thumped against it. It was Prince who had been waiting patiently for her, and was demonstrating his pleasure at her coming at last.

She stooped and kissed his smooth head.

“Dear dog,” she whispered in his beautiful orange ear. “You love poor Meg better than other people, don’t you?” when she had said it she was ashamed of her folly, reminding herself that Miss Trant was her friend. She had meant not to like her before she came. It was impossible for Meg, at least, to resist Eileen Trant. She was so generous, so gracious, in her beautiful aloof way : and she had taken a great fancy to Meg ; and would have loaded her with gifts and caresses if Meg had not drawn back.

They were having a picnic tea on Dooras mountain in woods that enclosed a gable of an old monastery of St. Benedict. Lady Turloughmore was to have made one of the party, but she cried off at the last moment, and the three young people started, Meg driving the fat little pony, Pasha, in the old-fashioned basket-phaeton which carried the tea equipage and leaving the others to follow. She had taken to accentuating her dependent position, somewhat to Lady Turloughmore’s grief and perplexity.

They were having a picnic tea on Dooras mountain and the mountain road was steep. Where it began to climb Meg descended, and led the pony by the bridle. The other two walked with her for a time. Soon they got ahead. By the time she had lost a few minutes getting a stone out of Pasha's shoe, an operation during which they had not discovered that she was not following, they had turned a corner, round a clump of bushes and were lost to sight. They were wrangling—if the word were not too harsh a one to describe anything such gracious creatures could do : disagreeing, perhaps—on a question of poetry. Algy Rosse had been more than commonly flippant and Miss Trant had been indignant : their divergence seemed to engage them as much as other people's love-making, for they never looked back to discover Meg's absence. She felt a little forlorn, and was sharp with herself. The Turloughmores were spoiling her. She reminded herself that other employers would be very different. Must she fancy slights because she received none ?

There was a certain glade where the blackberries grew thick in autumn, where there was already lavish promise of the fruit. It lay warm and scented on the hillside, delicious singing streamlets making a wet sweetness in the air of the hot day. Midway of the glade was a little well, cool and clear, hooded

with a stone arch, overhung by a fine chestnut tree. It was the spot on which they were to picnic.

Arrived on the spot she found no trace of the other two. They had wandered away, too engrossed in their disagreement to notice that they were on the wrong track. She unharnessed Pasha and set him free to browse on the grass : then set out her tea equipage. She made her fire of sticks and put the kettle to boil, expecting momentarily that the other two would arrive. Once or twice she thought she heard their voices ; but though she halloed no answer came. There was no sign of life beyond the grazing sheep and cattle on the sun-warmed hillside and the wild life of birds and rabbits and such creatures as hardly disturbed the solitude. It was warm in the sun. She was glad they had not made the trysting-place where the Abbey gable flung a dark shadow.

From where she sat, dreaming, with her knees almost up to her chin, her hands clasping them, in the attitude of him in Rossetti's poem who recognised that the wood-spurge had a cup of three, she could see the chimneys of Carrick through a break in the woods. Cold and smokeless they looked in the afternoon sunshine, while Castle Eagle further away was hardly visible for the silver haze which came up from the sea.

She waited to make the tea till the others should



arrive. The shadows grew long on the hillside while she waited ; time passed and of a sudden, an eerie feeling began to creep over her—the place was so very lonely. She wondered what on earth had become of them. They must have missed her somehow. Perhaps they had gone home without her. How had they missed her? The wood was not so very extensive that they could have lost her easily. She began to feel vexed and hurt because they had not cared to discover her. They had forgotten. Her lip quivered at the slight, and it was really very lonely.

It was almost a relief when a shock-headed, wild-looking urchin appeared in the glade, and began calling his cattle. Discovering her he forgot the cattle and stood staring at her shyly from under his mane of hair, his thumb stuck childishly in his mouth.

She was quite glad to see him or anything human. Forgetting that she might be leading him from the path of duty she called him to her and asked if he would like some tea. He nodded his head, never withdrawing his thumb from his mouth or his eyes from her face. Perhaps he was a fairy, she said to herself, mocking her fears.

The kettle had boiled itself almost empty. It was half-past five o'clock and there was not a sign of the truants. She began to wonder what she



ought to do. How had they missed her? They would hardly come now. She would have to go home without them, else Lady Turloughmore would be alarmed. Perhaps they would be at home before her. She remembered now to have heard that the mountain woods were puzzling to those who did not know them well. Pooka-haunted, some one had said; and the pooka led the unwary queer dances sometimes over Dooras mountain.

She made the tea and poured out a cup for herself and one for the boy: then refilled the kettle and set it again to boil in case the others should come after all. She took out her stores of tea-cakes and bread and honey, and jam and sandwiches, making the boy's eyes open wide, with a famished delight. She cut him a great slice of bread and heaped it high with honey. He almost snatched it from her, though he made a curtsy as he took it.

He ate quickly enough, yet with a certain greediness, giving all his attention to it like the browsing cattle he was neglecting. He drank his tea in great gulps, and accepted the offer of a second cup with sparkling eyes, eating and drinking with such ecstasy of enjoyment that Meg could not but enjoy seeing him feast. She was glad she had brought abundance, making allowance for healthy appetites in the open air. She noticed pitifully that he looked half-fed. The face under its fell of hair was pinched: the little

body in its rags seemed like that of a small animal within a heavy coat. She had a feeling that he was so light that she could lift him like a feather-weight. Yet the thinness was not the result of natural ill-health, else he would hardly have eaten so greedily.

She had to check him at last, fearing he would over-eat himself. She wrapped the remnants of the feast in a paper and gave it to him : she was pretty sure the lost ones would not now come in time for their tea. She had better be going home.

“ Keep it till you are hungry again,” she said, handing him the packet.

The boy had not yet spoken a word. Now he jerked his finger downwards, pointing down the hill.

“ She’ll take it from me,” he said.

“ Who is she ? ”

“ Biddy Mulcahy. I never had enough to ate since I come to her from the poor-house. She has all she can be doin’ to feed her own.”

A nurse-child : and in a poor cabin overflowing with children, as often happens, through somebody’s ignorance or neglect.

“ I’d better be going home now wid Mr. Kelly’s cows,” he said. “ I’ve sixpence a week for drivin’ them up the mountain an’ home again. He’s a terrible cross man. He’ll hit me for delayin’ ; but Mrs. Kelly when his back is turned gives me a bit o’ bread wid sugar on it.”

“ Oh, I mustn't keep you,” said Meg. “ I think I'd better be going myself.”

She stood up.

“ Good-bye,” she said: “ I don't know your name ; but if you'll come to see me sometimes—to that house down there—— ” she indicated Castle Eagle in the haze, “ I shall be glad. Ask for Miss Hildebrand. Can you remember that name ? Miss Hildebrand. I'll see you have a good meal and something to take away with you. Lady Turloughmore is very kind. So good-bye, for the present.”

“ Johnny Flynn's my name,” said the urchin, suddenly talkative.

“ Good-bye, Johnny Flynn. Don't forget to ask for Miss Hildebrand. I wish I could carry you down the mountain ; but you must drive the cattle.”

“ They'll go home rale aisy before me. If I was to help you ketch the pony it wouldn't take me much longer.”

From somewhere, down in the plain, there rang out the Angelus bell. Six o'clock. She must be home by seven. And Pasha occasionally showed disinclination to be caught.

“ Very well, Johnny Flynn,” she said. “ You shall help me to catch and harness the pony, and we will go down the mountain together. Perhaps I could speak for you to Mr. Kelly so that he wouldn't be angry.”



“He’ll be mad enough when he sees me comin’, for he’ll think I’ve strayed the cows on him. But I don’t mind him hittin’ me. I don’t like goin’ through the wood whin the evenin’ is fallin’. It isn’t that I’d be mindin’ the ould monks. I’m afeard o’ fairies. The mountain is full o’ fairies, so it is.”

Pasha was caught and harnessed with Johnny Flynn’s help. They started off down the mountain-side at a leisurely pace, the cows going in front. Before them the wood hid the wide plain which lay covered with a haze of heat.

When they had left the wood behind and were descending between the fields of corn Johnny Flynn pointed towards Carrick, over which a long flight of rooks was going in a black line.

“I think th’ ould lady’s dead,” he said. “I went to her for a hatchin’ o’ duck-eggs on Monday and the divil a sign o’ life there was in the place. I wint agin yesterday an’ the ould hins was scratchin’ about for what they could pick up betune the stones o’ the yard. I said to meself then she must be dead. I told Biddy Mulcahy an’ she hit me a welt, tellin’ me not to be troublin’ me foolish head over other people’s business.”



## CHAPTER XX

### THE POISONED HOUSE

MEG heard Johnny Flynn with a horrified amazement. Monday! It was now Friday. They had not been thinking of Miss Roche. Lady Turloughmore had been engrossed with Julia's illness. She had been helping to entertain the visitors, taking all manner of small duties and cares off Lady Turloughmore's shoulders. While they forgot her, the poor little old spinster, who somehow, despite her oddity, made a warm place for herself in her friends' hearts might have been dying in loneliness.

Horrible! Terrors rushed over Meg's mind in a flood. She remembered that Miss Roche lived utterly alone, not even a dog to keep her company since Rattler's death. Supposing she had been taken ill suddenly? Who was to do anything for her, who prepare her food? Meg's imagination ran away with her. She pictured the helpless old woman lying unable to move hand or foot, dying of hunger and thirst, while her friends occupied themselves after their fashions. It was too terrible. She could have screamed with the agitation of her mind.

“There’s Biddy’s cabin up the boreen,” said Johnny Flynn, indicating a boulder-like erection at the top of which seemed a heap of straw. “You can be lettin’ me down now ! If ye wait long enough ye’ll hear me bawlin’ whin Biddy lays the stick on me for not getting the cows home earlier.”

“Tell her she is not to beat you,” said Meg ; “tell her I am coming to see her to-morrow to explain how I kept you. And listen. I want you to do something for me after you’ve driven home the cows.”

“I’d do anything for you,” said Johnny, fervently. “Aren’t you like an angel in Heaven to me ? I’m stronger nor I look, if it’s anything big ye want me to do.”

“I want you, as soon as you’ve driven the cows home, to run to Castle Eagle as fast as you can and leave a message for Lady Turloughmore that I’ve gone to Carrick, that if I don’t come back it means that Miss Roche is very ill ; that the necessary things and a doctor are to be sent. You’ll remember all that ? ”

She was wishing that Lord Erris was there. She felt he would have known what to do.

Johnny repeated the message, his eyes blinking up at her where he stood by the phaeton.

“I’ll get off as quick as I can,” he said. “Maybe I’ll be able to do it without Biddy ketchin’ me at all.

I'll have it worse later on, but I don't mind it at all, at all. You're as kind as the Blessed Mother that the nuns used to talk about in the Union. My own mother used to hit me near as hard as Biddy ; she was a trampin' woman ; wan o' them tinkers. I used to wonder if the Blessed Mother would be kind to me if I was to die or if she'd believe the names they called me."

"I'm sure she wouldn't," said Meg, gently. "And I'm sure you don't deserve the names, Johnny. They mustn't call you names. Hurry home now with the cows, and afterwards take my message to Castle Eagle as fast as your legs will carry you. It is a matter of life or death, remember."

She drove off at as fast a pace as Pasha could compass and a much faster one than he was accustomed to. However, he shook his little head, and with a memory of his youth trotted away briskly. The road was all down-hill and it was not very long before they arrived at the gates of Carrick. Meg had thought of the gates. If they were locked she must break the lock again as she had done once before, for she had no means of disposing of Pasha and the phaeton outside the gates, and though she could have crossed the wall herself by one of the many unmended breaches there was still the difficulty of Pasha and the phaeton.

She found the gate half-open ; and numerous



animals which she was sure did not belong to Miss Roche wandering about inside. Tinkers' (*i.e.* gipsies) donkeys and goats and cattle. She knew that Miss Roche waged war on such: and that there was hardly a Petty Sessions held at Lahort at which she had not the tinkers "summonsed."

The open gate, the wandering ragged beasts, struck her heart with a forlorn sense of calamity.

"As long as I'm alive I'll make them fear me," Miss Roche had often said. There was a tinker's pony, ragged and lean, grazing almost at the hall-door. It seemed like an omen.

She left Pasha to stand, fastening up his reins and trusting him not to wander. You could leave Pasha by the roadside any day of the week and feel sure that he wouldn't get into any mischief. As she looked back before turning the wall of the house she saw him amicably rubbing noses with the "commonality" pony.

She was not minded to stand at the hall-door and ring. She felt it would be useless. She must effect an entrance some other way if the kitchen door was not open. As she made her way round to the back of the house she noticed that the hens were wandering about the shrubberies, picking up a living for themselves. The strange silence and desolation of it all—the walled garden which she had taken on her first coming for a grave-yard,



oppressed her with a sense of gloom. She found herself wishing for the society of Prince, and was glad of the intrusion of the tinkers' animals because it meant the tinkers themselves following at some time or another.

The kitchen door was closed against her ; but, after a search, she found a window which had lost its hasp, and entered by that. Along the dark and echoing passages, up the stairs, she went, through the hall, where the sun, now near its setting, made a red blotch on the wall, falling on the stuccoed classical head of a flying Love and suffusing it as though with blood. All the time she was aware of a strange, bitter, terrible smell in the house, indescribably evil. Above her stretched the hollow vastness of the house, with its interminable corridors and wings, all empty, all silent, not a trace of human life anywhere, but a strange oppressive heaviness over all.

She went from room to room, oppressed and stifling, finding only a mouldy and shuttered darkness, the gaunt shapes of furniture like ghosts looking out of the gloom. But at last she opened a door, and had the sensation, though the room was as dark and mouldy-smelling as the others, that there was some one in the room ; some one, something, in the bed like a catafalque which took up the centre of the floor.

She had to make her way to one of the shuttered windows and open it before she could see what else the room contained. The bars fell with a clang : the shutters came back : the evening light poured into the room. She knew without thinking of it that the room was full of old finery of all sorts so that it resembled an old clothes' shop. Open wardrobes revealed shelves and pegs crowded to their utmost capacity. The door was so hung with garments that its purpose was entirely concealed. Every chair, every table in the room—and it was crammed with furniture—were piled and hung with wearing apparel. Not exclusively feminine, for a pile of men's beaver hats, dating from the Thirties, heaped an armchair in one corner.

She noticed these things automatically. She had gone straight to the bedside. It was a big bed ; and there was a very small shrivelled-up form lying under a heap of clothes. The face was sharply peaked. The skin hung loose, yet it was strained tightly back showing the bones in a horrible prominence. Leaning over the piteous thing Meg did not need to ask what this horrible aspect meant. It meant—starvation.

Horror rushed like a black tide over the girl's soul. For a second, face to face with this terrible, piteous happening, she felt sick and faint, as though the pent-in air of the room poisoned her. She had

never dreamt that anything so horrible as a death by starvation should have happened to one she knew, come home, to her own doors so to speak. The sheer horror of it for the moment drove out fear; yet fear was waiting for her, ready to rush in upon her in an overwhelming tide.

She looked to right and left. Somewhere in the great, empty house a door slammed. The air of the room was certainly close, stifling. She went to the window and unhasped it. It was not easy to open and she kept looking over her shoulder towards the bed while she tried to do it. At last she succeeded. She lifted the window and it came down with a crash, the rope that hung it being broken. A pane smashed in the fall, and a west wind, strong and revivifying, rushed like a great river into the sickly poisonous atmosphere.

She thought she heard a movement in the bed and turned about. Was it possible that it was not death after all? With the hope fear fled from her for the moment. The oppressive weight on her lungs, on her heart, seemed lifted by the fresh wind, by the hope.

She went quickly to the bedside. The form was as rigid as before. She stooped to look into the terrible face and saw an eyelid quiver.

Immediately she was tense, braced, alert. She wanted twenty things, if the life that was just



lingering in the starved body was to be kept there and strengthened. Water : she wanted water first of all. The open mouth had a dry, terrible look with its cracked lips. Brandy : she wondered if she could find brandy ; and a fire ! Oh, if she only had any one to help her ! She did not dare to leave the house in search of help lest the life should flicker out. How long would it be before help came ? She turned an imploring glance towards the window. There was nothing in sight, except the tinkers' beasts and Pasha, placidly grazing.

As she turned, her foot struck something on the floor—an empty water-bottle, lying by a broken glass. How long had they been there ? For how long had the poor soul endured thirst as well as hunger till endurance came to an end.

The thought of the basket in the phaeton came to her with an immense relief. There were supplies there beyond what she had given to Johnny Flynn : milk, water, she could be sure of : a kettle, a spirit stove and spirit, a box of matches.

She ran through the silent house where the air was poisoned as though by death itself, and, since she could not unbar the front door unaided, she opened one of the long windows of the dining-room that gave on the terrace and stepped out ; out into the cool, beautiful evening full of the west wind. Pasha was nibbling the shrubs of the lawn and looked



round with a friendly recognition as she came. He had pulled the phaeton after him into the bushes.

“I ought to take you out,” she said to him; “but I haven’t time, and I really daren’t risk your getting down to the lower terraces with this thing behind you. I shall have to tie you up to something you won’t be strong enough to pull with you.”

She found what she wanted in a heavy iron seat which was almost buried in the overgrown grass, and secured her steed. Then she took the basket. As she did this the sun dropped behind the mountains, leaving the world cold.

She hurried back through the house of which dusk had already taken possession. The corners were full of shadows. The strange, heavy, bitter smell was all about her. She scurried along up the stairs and down the corridor to Miss Roche’s room. Presently, unless help came, she would have to go down into the lower regions in search of various things. The thought daunted her. How evil-smelling the house was! Again she had the sense of faintness as she hurried along. She did not like to think of those lower regions. She paused to throw up a long window on the landing and let the air in. She felt no one could live long in that terrible foulness.

She poured a little water into the dry, strained mouth and could not be sure it was swallowed: some

of it at least was returned, running out of the corners of the lips. She tried milk then, almost drop by drop, lifting the face that looked so surely a dead face on her arm. Brandy—if she only had brandy. She dare not give much milk lest that too should be spilled out. She laid the head back on its pillow and went down to the dining-room. She hunted frantically through the cupboards of the sideboard and the wall cupboards. They were stuffed with all manner of things which made the search more difficult: but there was no brandy.

While she searched the room was growing dark. The dining-room was on the north side of the house and the windows were obscured. There was yet a cold twilight outside, but the shadow of the mountains had darkened the western sky and made premature night in the house, which was always dark because of its trees.

She must search further. There might be a cellar downstairs. She stood at the head of the stairs hesitating. It was very dark below and there was an evil air ascending; she was aware of a curious rustling going on down there in the darkness. After all—was it likely she would find brandy? The cellars would have been empty this many a year. She must try giving a little more milk. If that failed she must make a further search. She was afraid of the cellars and the evil-smelling lower

storey from which the poison seemed to ascend. She went upstairs. To her immense relief the milk was retained, though she could detect no act of swallowing. Light, she must have light. The room was steadily growing darker. There was a lamp, but the reservoir was empty. The candles had burnt out in the candle-sticks, the grate was empty and rusted.

She must find candles or fuel, or something to light her before the darkness came altogether. She was afraid of the darkness. She must have light to see what she could do for the woman who she was convinced now had a spark of life in her. Would help never come? Surely Johnny could have reached Castle Eagle by this time? Panic seized her as she began to imagine the many things which might have interfered with Johnny's delivery of her message. Supposing the woman who housed him had kept him back, not listening to his explanations! Supposing . . . !

She thought she heard a low sigh from the motionless figure in the bed. She must have light: she must find restoratives: she must descend to the darkness underground, if needs be, to find fuel, or she must go outside and find derelict wood, brambles and sticks, anything at all to build a fire. But before that she would take her courage in both hands, and explore the cellars underneath. She would



never forgive herself if her cowardice should be the cause of losing a life.

Meg had need for carefulness. The box only held a few matches. She lamented that she had not taken a full box in the basket and not one half-empty. There must be light : there must be matches and candles and coal and wood somewhere, if only she could find them.

Summoning up all her courage she went downstairs. Before descending into the darkness underneath she looked for candles in the candelabra of the dining-room and found none : then in the drawing-room where the blinds were all down shutting out the pale sky.

She had a somewhat prolonged search, but at last she lit upon a remnant of candle—so small that the time it would last before it burnt out might be counted by minutes. She thought it would just light her through the cellars and kitchens, enable her with good luck to discover the things she wanted and get upstairs again, before it went out.

She lit the candle-end on the stairs going down to the kitchen, where there was hardly a glimmer of light. There seemed miles of underground kitchens and cellars to explore, and nothing in any of them to help her. All the time she felt she could hardly endure the air of the place. At last—in the



corner of a kitchen she found a little heap of dry twigs, some old newspapers and a basket with a few sods of turf in it.

Her heart lifted with the discovery. She set down her snuff of candle on the edge of the kitchen-table while she gathered the things together. Here was life, courage, safety. With a fire and light she thought she might even leave the sick woman while she went in search of help, which she felt sure now was not coming in response to her urgent message. What could they be thinking of her? Lady Turloughmore would be frightened about her absence. They would be searching for her everywhere while she needed the help that did not come.

She stood up from her cramped position and reached for the candle. It was guttering to its end. Would it last her the way up? How sickening the air of the place was! It made her heart beat heavily and her head throb with a dull feeling of congestion. She must not faint. If she fainted she would die.

The weight of the basket dragged at her arm. She stumbled. Out in the passage the air was fresher. There must be a window open somewhere.

Suddenly the scrap of candle she was holding sputtered and went out. She was enveloped in darkness or semi-darkness, and she was aware that she was afraid of the empty house, of the yawning

cavernous kitchens and cellars on every side of her that were so many pits of darkness.

Down fell the basket with a clatter. She had dropped the precious matches with the rest. She went fumbling about, feeling oddly faint and sick while she reminded herself that she must, she must keep her wits together for the sake of the life that had yet to be saved upstairs. She would never forgive herself if through cowardice she were to fail now.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE WRONG MAN

WHILE she groped for the matches, not finding them, she heard a new sound in the house—the sound of footsteps overhead.

She forgot her search, standing bolt upright to listen. The feet came with a steady yet light tread across the hall above, and began ascending the stairs. Unhinged as her nerves were by the faint sickening smell of the house she was more terrified at first by the sound than the silence. Was it a friend or a foe upstairs in the darkness? She found the kitchen staircase after some groping and went up, letting the swing-door at the top slam behind her. She heard its echoes reverberate through the silent house and was frightened at the noise she herself had made.

As she stood in the hall there was not a sound to be heard. Had she imagined the footsteps overhead? Were they living footsteps or the feet of some dead and gone Roche who returned by night to the house of its earthly habitation? Did ghosts walk with a light, firm tread? Did a ghost wear boots?

The fantastic questions crowded upon her. She stood in the outer hall looking up the staircase. Not a sound. But stay—some one was coming down. Oh, relief! Oh joy! A voice spoke—Algy Rosse's easy, pleasant voice.

“Is it you, you poor little thing? And are you in the dark all alone? What's the matter with Miss Roche? What a pestilential atmosphere! Some drain must be leaking into the house! Or is it dead rats? or what is it?”

He had come down the stairs. He was close to her.

“I've been horribly frightened,” she sobbed, in an ecstasy of relief. “It's all right now you've come. I suppose the house is poisoned.”

“I should just think it was. The windows are all shut, I suppose, and the poison has got thoroughly in. Why, you are trembling!”—he slipped his arm about her, with a kind protecting pressure.

“Don't mind me,” she said, her teeth chattering. “I'm all right now you've come. I can't find any candles, and I've just dropped the wood and coal in the passage downstairs. How dark it has become! I've been looking for brandy. It's horrible. The poor soul upstairs has been almost starved to death. She is still just living, I think. If we only had some brandy!”

“I've brought some from the village pub. I came upon your messenger as I was going up the



mountain in search of you. I can't forgive myself. There are surely fairies in that wood. I sent the queer boy—was he a fairy too !—with word to Castle Eagle, and I left a message at Dr. Doherty's. He was out—with a case up the mountains. We shall have to do what we can without him. Now, about that coal. Let us break a window first so that this confounded stench can escape."

He had some difficulty in letting down the bars of the hall door, but he succeeded at last and set it open. How sweet the wind was, smelling of dews that blew in their faces !

"That is better," Algy Rosse said. "No wonder you were unnerved. I should have been here with you. Now for the coal."

It was quite a different matter returning down the dark staircase with him by her side. She felt quite light-hearted, the relief was intense. They gathered the coal and wood together, their hands meeting over it in the darkness. She guided him upstairs, opening windows everywhere as they went. In the bedroom she bent to listen for any sign of breathing from the sick woman. She thought she felt an almost imperceptible breath upon her cheek.

While Algy Rosse lit the fire she mixed a little brandy with the milk, and as well as she could in the gloom she poured some into Miss Roche's mouth : the wood sprang into a blaze. She thought

she saw a change in the face—something less rigid, less terrible. Were the eyes opening? The fire-light was rising and falling. She thought the lids were lifted for an instant, but could not be sure.

Algy Rosse came and held a lit match to look at Miss Roche.

“ Good Lord ! ” he said, under his breath.

Then unmistakably the eyes opened. She attempted speech, but it was incoherent. The match went out.

“ I’ll tell you what,” he said. “ Let us get her out of this. The whole place is poisoned. The moon is rising. I saw poor Pasha waiting patiently outside. The pure air of the night will do her good and not harm. Can you wrap her in the blankets? I can carry her down easily. Let us give her some more of the milk. If she’s not thoroughly poisoned already she’ll recover more quickly in clean surroundings.”

Meg was amazed at the capacity, the quick decision, the deftness of the golden youth, once the decision had been made. He put her aside quietly, gently.

“ Perhaps you don’t know that I had an invalid mother,” he explained, when he had carried Miss Roche in her blankets downstairs. “ I used to do a great many things for her. She said I was better than any nurse.”

He was settling the little body as comfortably as might be in the phaeton when suddenly, as it seemed, it came to life. The voice in which Miss Roche spoke was the merest whisper.

“ You’re not leaving—my house—open—to any rogue—or robber.”

“ No, no ; that’s all right,” Algy Rosse said soothingly. “ I’ll shut the dining-room window and come out by the hall door, closing it after me. The house will be quite safe.”

“ You’re hurting me—abominably—— ”

“ Oh, I am so sorry,” he said. “ I didn’t know. What is it ? ”

“ A—broken—leg—I—fell.”

“ There. You’ll tell me another time. I’ll try not to hurt you more than I can help.”

He led the patient Pasha, while Meg sat in the phaeton, steadying the swathed little figure as well as she could. And so they arrived at Castle Eagle just in time to intercept Lady Turloughmore as her carriage turned out of the gates.

The doctor arrived presently and discovered that there was a bad fracture of one leg. He shook his head over it. The starvation, the poison, the fracture—“ she may have broken it in bed,” he said ; “ old bones are brittle ”—were going to make a long job. He suggested a trained nurse.

“ Let me,” said Meg, eagerly. “ I know just



what to do. I nursed my small brother when he had a broken leg. I'm sure I could manage."

She carried her point. She had been feeling that she had too little to do, too much time for brooding and introspection. She said to herself that she was not cut out for a fine young lady. If the time came that she could leave Lady Turloughmore she must find something to do in the world which would keep her incessantly occupied.

With two invalids in the house their hands were full. Miss Trant and Mr. Rosse were left to entertain each other, which they did, so far as Meg could judge, by a succession of little quarrels, half-playful, half in earnest. They found so many subjects on which they disagreed. Presently Miss Trant took her gracious presence off the scene. She was due in Scotland at a country-house party for the grouse shooting. The tenderness of her parting with Lady Turloughmore was noticeable. She was to come again in the spring, when Lord Erris should be well again, she said, and able to entertain her. She ran back from the carriage to kiss Lady Turloughmore a second time—"like a daughter," said Meg to herself, "like a daughter."

She had teased Algy Rosse to the end, and had flung back a satirical speech at him as she went off, between her soft calls to Lady Turloughmore, sweet as the calls of a thrush.



Algy went a day or two later. "No one had any time for him," he said, with dissatisfaction, and his career called him. He had been quite comfortably forgetting his career for several weeks.

Before he went he had an interview with Meg, the purport of which amazed her.

"I never suspected such a thing," she said, in answer to him when he said, with a boyish heat and vexation, that she must have known, have understood, his hopes. "How could I think that any one would look at me when Miss Trant was by."

He flushed suddenly.

"Miss Trant is—there is something lacking in her which you have got. She is a moon-maiden, a big, beautiful, cold child."

Oddly Meg was nettled. She did not want to have—for Algy Rosse—the thing which Miss Trant had not got.

"Don't be vexed with me," he said humbly. "I misunderstood—that's all. Think it over, will you, till I come again?"

Meg would not promise to think it over, though she looked at Algy Rosse with a gaze almost affectionate. How good he was to look at! how clean! how shining! She almost wished she could have been in love with him. It would have been delightful to have Algy for a lover, if only one could have cared. Now she was disturbed, annoyed that he

should have fancied himself in love with her. The idea was repellant. She hated it ; good and dear as he was.

“ For the matter of that,” she said, “ I’m just as cold as Miss Trant—colder, if you only knew.”

She blushed suddenly, remembering the Austrian hussar ; and he misconstrued the blush.

“ Oh no, you are not,” he said. “ You wrong yourself. If I knew there was another man I’d let you be. If there was another man—— ”

“ There is no other man.”

On that they parted. It was a relief to see him go, although as the days passed Meg missed his gay *insouciance*, his kind concern for herself.

Miss Roche crept back to life slowly. Despite the doctor’s forebodings the bone had knitted. There had been no serious result of the poisoning. Carrick was in the hands of workmen who had discovered dreadful things in connection with the drainage of the house, and the things that lay hidden in its dark corners underground. It was a marvel she was alive. Only her constant life out-of-doors before her accident had kept her in health.

She occupied the room next door to Meg. At first Meg had slept in the room, like a nurse, to be ready at the first signal that she was needed. Presently the patient was doing so well that she had returned to her own room. September passed,

and October came. Lord Erris was expected home some time about the end of October.

A night came when, after Meg had seen her patient comfortably in bed, and was in her own room, taking down her hair, she heard a tapping at her door. Opening it she saw Lady Turloughmore standing there, the pigeon on her shoulder. He was very often on her shoulder or the back of her chair.

“ May I come in, Miss Hildebrand ? ”

“ Do, please, Lady Turloughmore.”

It was the first time Lady Turloughmore had visited her like this : and Meg wondered what it might portend.

Lady Turloughmore sat down in the easy-chair by the fire. The pigeon hopped on to the back of the chair and perched there sleepily, one round eye on the fire.

“ What beautiful thick hair you have ! ” she said, stretching out her hand to smooth Meg’s hair. “ Mine used to be very thick and very brown. It has grown thin now, and it is fast turning grey. I am going to put it up under a widow’s cap.”

Meg was startled. Not knowing what to say she uttered an exclamation under her breath, and turned eyes of compassion on the delicate worn face.

“ My son must take the title,” she went on. “ I

would not stand in his way. Dr. Kellner is satisfied with his general health. He says there is a great improvement. If only he can walk ! ”

She looked piteously at Meg.

“ If only he can walk ! ” she repeated. “ Why should he not have a wife and children like other men ? If he would marry Eileen ! She has strength and courage—as I had. There is not a drop of the morbid or the nervous in her whole beautiful body. Why should not Ulick be happy, as his father and I were—and leave the future to take care of itself ? ”

“ Why not indeed ? ” said Meg ; and in her passionate sympathy for the grief in the brave, sweet face, she felt that for a time at least she ardently desired that Lord Erris should be happy with Miss Trant.

“ You are so kind, so sympathetic,” said Lady Turloughmore. “ Perhaps—if Ulick was happy and did not need us ; you and I might go away together—for a time at least—till some one claimed you.”

She paused and looked at Meg with a meaning in her gaze before proceeding.

“ So you couldn’t care for Algy ? ” she said. “ I wonder at that, Meg. He is really a dear boy, though there have been times when I’ve been unjust and hardened my heart against him because he seemed likely enough to sit in my son’s place.



Dr. Kellner says there is no reason why Ulick should not be a very strong man. If only he could be a quite happy one ! ”

Into Meg’s mind came back Algy Rosse’s whimsical, half-serious speech.

“ The only thing to do would be to catch an Earl of Turloughmore and shut him up and make him die in his bed.”

Well, she did not want the new Earl of Turloughmore to die before his years were accomplished. She wanted him to live and be happy ; and for herself to go away out of his life, and all this life which had grown so dear to her.

“ Algy has not much money of his own,” said Lady Turloughmore, watching Meg’s face wistfully. “ My son, of course, makes him an allowance. He would increase it in the event of his marriage. If my son should marry he would feel he owed Algy some reparation.”

“ Mr. Rosse wouldn’t feel it,” said Meg, quietly. “ He wants Lord Erris to marry, as we all do. Please, I should love to go away with you, Lady Turloughmore, I should love it.”

“ And this dear creature ! ” said Lady Turloughmore, stroking the pigeon, which had just hopped to her shoulder and on to her knee. “ We should have to take him with us. I call him my Peace-of-Mind. I could not have got through that time

without what seemed to me his portent. I wonder why he was sent, since all my hopes were in vain."

She turned away her head, and her thin shoulders were shaken by a sob.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE WIDOW

A FEW days later there was an arrival at Castle Eagle of a neatly attired young woman from a Dublin shop who had come to measure Lady Turloughmore for her mourning.

This late putting on of weeds was terrible to Meg. Opening a door by chance upon the young woman surrounded by black stuffs she felt as though she had surprised an undertaker at his gruesome task. She went away and wept in her own room because of the shock she had had, reproaching herself for being nervy, as soon as she had controlled her tears. The arrival of the young woman with her black bale had cast a shadow on the house.

Miss Roche, by this time, was sustaining the reputation of her family, which according to her was so tenacious of life that a Roche lived on where any one else would have died. She had begun to lose the terrible look of starvation which she had worn for some days after her rescue, and had settled down happily enough at Castle Eagle, not protesting

—which was very unlike her, when Lady Turloughmore said that she must by no manner of means return to her own house. There was room for her and to spare at Castle Eagle, which was too big for the family that occupied it.

“I don’t mind telling you, child, I’ve had a shake,” the indomitable old woman confessed to Meg. “It’s all very well to be independent and live in your own house as long as you can, even when it’s all rotting to pieces about your ears. But—’tis another matter to be lying alone sick in it, and not even a dog to keep you company, and you not able to do a thing for yourself and—— There, I won’t talk about it. It unnerves me. I’ll put the whole place up to auction and sell the things. And, dear, I’d like to do something for you and that lovely young man that carried me so tenderly the night you saved my life. I thought him very sweet on you. If it was to be that there was any difficulty about money you’d have all that was made by the sale of the sticks. Some of the pictures are good. The gentleman in the hall with the green silk coat and the dark hair I’ve always heard tell was a Romney, and would bring bags of gold if he was sent to London.”

She paused for breath after the long speech.

“Oh no, no,” said Meg, answering the portion of it on which her attention had fastened. “Dear



Miss Roche—it's all wrong about Mr. Rosse. We never thought of such a thing."

"Maybe aye, maybe no. I used to think something different. Anyhow I'd better die in a family when I do come to die. Isn't Lady Turloughmore an angel of a woman? And isn't it a queer thing she should be bent under the weight of her sorrows, unless it is that God chastens whom He loves, as the Scriptures say."

It was a wild, gusty October day: Miss Roche had been lifted on her invalid couch into Meg's room, while her own room was having the first thorough turning-out since she had come to it. The first fire of the season was lit in the pretty room, and there was an aromatic smell of cherry-wood, for one of the trees that had come down in the great winter storm on the night when the yacht had foundered, had been chopped into firewood.

The chintz-hung, firelit room was very pleasant, and Miss Roche looked about it with approval.

"I'm glad to be getting well," she said. "I suppose I'm not good enough to die yet. I was in a queer state that night you found me, you and your young man."

Meg passed over the implication.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "neither of us deserves the credit of having saved your life. That belongs in the first place to Johnny Flynn, a

nurse-child from the Union. He was sent to you for a hatching of eggs, and could make no one hear. Luckily he thought of telling me. I met him on the mountain where we had gone picnicking, and by accident I had missed my company. The woman he is with is not good to him. She has a houseful of her own. He looks starved—a little anatomy of death, as Spenser says. She often beats him. She beat him that evening for delaying talking to me instead of driving home the cows, and locked him in an outhouse. If he hadn't discovered a way to get out, and risked her anger further by taking it, the help would not have come which perhaps saved your life, or gave it a better chance."

"Johnny Flynn. A peaked, red-haired boy, very thin and miserable. He often came for hatchings for that woman, and I used to give him food to eat. I went to the woman about him. She is a plausible creature. She said he was fed as well as the rest but throve badly. It seemed like enough to be true of a poor-house child. I oughtn't to have believed her. Is he at that woman's mercy still? She had a mean, cunning, foxy face."

"Be easy about him. Lady Turloughmore has seen to that. He is here. She got the permission of the Guardians to employ him under the head-gardener. He has a love for a garden. He lives with Curran and his wife at the South Lodge. They

never had a child : and Mrs. Curran stopped me as I passed through yesterday to say he was the most beautiful boy in the world, with a beautiful heart, and the proof of it was that woman and the Union between them had not spoilt him. Rest easy about Johnny Flynn. He'll be own son to the Currans. You shall see him as soon as we get you out."

"I'm glad of that. I'll look after the boy, and give him whatever chance in life he wants. The sticks'll sell for a good bit, I dare say. There was nothing common at Carrick. I'll keep enough to furnish a few rooms. Shelagh Turloughmore will let me have as many rooms as I want for myself. I'll have my own little spot to retire to when I feel I'm better alone, and the things about me to remind me of the time I was a beauty and couldn't get home from a ball to my Papa's house in Upper Mount Street without twenty fellows running after the carriage. The Club windows used to be full in Stephen's Green to see me walk in the Green—it wasn't open then to the commonality as it is now—with a parasol over my head and my hair in ringlets like the Empress Eugenie, and my skirt frilled to my waist over a hoop. I was a pretty thing then. You thought me an old hen-wife the first day you ever saw me."

Meg did not deny the imputation. She came to



Miss Roche's side and settled her more comfortably with an additional cushion behind her shoulders.

"Thank you, child," Miss Roche said gratefully. "It's the kind creature you are! Indeed I'd be happy if I was to spend the end of my days in the midst of ye. But I've to look ahead. Suppose Erris—Lord Turloughmore he ought to be by right, and the sooner the better since it has to be done—brings home that fine beautiful young woman to Castle Eagle! What with her money and her rank I'm thinking some of the great old days will come back to Castle Eagle. I'm not saying she'd rather have my room than my company, though that may well be. She seems too sweet a creature, from what I've seen of her, to let me know, even if it was so. There's a Dower House to be sure. You and I and Shelagh Turloughmore might squeeze in there: or if a lodge was empty they might let me have it. With my furniture it wouldn't be too bad."

While Miss Roche chattered, her little bright eyes half-veiled by the ivory-coloured lids, watched Meg. She changed the subject suddenly.

"'Tisn't likely you'd be in it long," she said. "Some one will see to that. What a pretty room you've got! It's like Shelagh——"

Meg concluded the sentence over which she had hesitated.

"To give such a room as this to a dependent."



“ Stuff and nonsense—a dependent. Why, child, they’re dependent on you. Of course Shelagh couldn’t have known when you were coming what you’d be like. No one could have known. What’s the other side of that ? ”

The question came abruptly.

She indicated with a pointed finger the rough-hewn wall which showed beneath the chintz. That end of the room was conspicuous by its lack of the pretty pictures which brightened the other three walls wherever there was a space for them.

“ What’s there ? ”

“ It’s the tower.”

“ The tower. To be sure it is ! They used to say this room was haunted. I hope I’m not babbling like an old fool. They say Conal M’Garvey still inhabits the tower. You don’t believe in ghosts, you fresh, open-air thing. Carrick was full of them. I never noticed them. I remember my father saying that his Aunt Sabina could see the ghosts. She had a most unpleasant way of crying out if you were taking a chair : ‘ Don’t ! don’t ! You’re sitting on Great-Uncle Theophilus’s small clothes ! ’ Or ‘ You’re simply flattening Lady Roche of Queen Elizabeth’s day, ruff and all. Ugh ! There goes her stomacher ! My father said it led some people to eat their meals standing. He was hardened. If he happened to sit down on a ghost he stayed there. His Aunt

Sabina, who lived with him till she died, left her cashmere shawl and her cameo brooch away from him as a mark of her displeasure. The shawl was rotting to pieces and the cameo was a poor specimen. He didn't grudge them to his first cousin, Maria Roche, who had been scared out of her life by sitting down once on a phantom beaver hat."

"I don't know," said Meg, slowly. "I may have heard Conal M'Garvey."

"A handful of bones getting ready for the Day of Judgment, hey?"

"I have certainly heard noises in the tower, twice in the early mornings. The last time I heard the noise it struck four o'clock immediately afterwards, I remember."

"The wind and the sea. They're accountable for a deal. What sort of noises?"

"I couldn't tell you. I was wakened out of my sleep. My impression is that it was a loud, violent noise. If I hear it again I shall report it more fully."

"A loud, violent noise! A handful of bones getting up and knitting together with the sound of a rushing wind. You dreamt of Conal M'Garvey and awoke in a desperate fright. Isn't that so? Your heart was thumping in your ears so that you could hear nothing else."

"As a matter of fact I was not frightened. The last time I heard it was in May. The beautiful

golden morning was in the room. The birds were all singing. How could I be frightened ? ”

“ Ah—I’m glad you weren’t. And I’m glad you don’t say there’s no ghost. You’re too sensible to say that there are no ghosts in that tower. My father always said they were smugglers—that they played the ghost, with hollow groans and all the rest of it, so as to frighten the people from inquiring into the noises they heard. He said they invented Conal M’Garvey. He had no respect for other people’s ghosts. Many a keg of fine brandy ; many a case of tobacco and wine ; many a bale of silk and laces came up the sea-way and were stored in the tower till such time as the excise men were out of the way. It’s true enough, by all accounts, that the smugglers used it.”

“ How did they get into the tower ? Not by sea. They say there’s communication between the tower and the Little Beach. But no vessel can approach the Little Beach because of the reef of rocks.”

“ They didn’t come by the Little Beach. They say it has the prettiest shells in the world. You know the shell window in the morning room. Those shells came from the Little Beach. A Lady Turloughmore in the Eighteenth Century learnt the art from no less a person than the inventor of it—the famous Mrs. Delany herself. If it be true that the shells

come from the Little Beach access there must have been easy enough in those days."

"I expect she was supplied by the smugglers."

"Very likely. They supplied a good many things to the ladies and gentlemen in those days. Anyhow, some one had access to the Little Beach, yet they say no boat could hope successfully to get across the reef. There's another way to the tower, they say. If there's a passage it ought to be a good wide one, for the smugglers had commodities beyond what they could carry on their backs. I never looked into it myself."

There was a tapping at the door. Lady Turloughmore came in with tears in her eyes.

"Julia's delusions grow harder to bear," she said, with a catch of her breath. "She will have it that my husband has come home. I do not know what she will say when she sees me in black."

The pigeon hopped from her shoulder to the table, and on to the deep window-sill, where he stood turning himself about prettily in the sun while the room was filled with the sound of his cooing.



## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MESSENGER FLIES AWAY

MEG had lain awake as she often did, staring out into the darkness of her room. She had made up her mind that she must go: that she could not await Lord Erris's return. Time had been when she had been ardent for the service of those friends who had been good to her and won her heart. Now she felt that she was better away. The kiss which had been given to her because she had a certain poor, pale resemblance to another woman might have been the flaming sword that drove her out from the place she had found so happy. She could never meet him unconsciously again, and, though Lady Turloughmore would be hurt at her going, if she knew all she would say that Meg was better away. The only loyal thing to do was to go.

How glad her father would be to get her back! Not that she was going to stay at home for long. Money was always needed at Crane's Nest. It was not likely she would find another employment like Lady Turloughmore's. Perhaps she would have to go back to the exile she loathed. The Archduchess

would welcome her, being sure of her discretion. She would be able to send money home for the education of the girls and boys. She had been back a year now. Surely she had had time to recover from her home-sickness and to grow well again.

But how would she break it to Lady Turloughmore? She did not wish to see Lord Erris again. She wanted to be gone before he returned—as far away as Budapest. He would not remember her absence if but Eileen Trant was kind. Surely if he came home cured he would go to Miss Trant. She would listen to him. Another woman would think it worth the risk ; and there would be another Earl and Countess of Turloughmore ready for the fate of the family.

She fell asleep, midway of her worry and perplexity. How long she had slept she did not know. She was awakened by a groan almost at her ear. She was sure this time, for the groaning went on after she was awake. She was in pitchy blackness. She sat up in bed staring into the darkness. Was the horrible drama that had been enacted in the tower centuries ago going on still? Did the tortured soul in the tortured body revisit the scene of its sufferings? Was it another doom on the Turloughmores that this sin should be visited upon them?

The darkness seemed unusually thick, impenetrable. She slept with her blinds drawn, her windows

open. There was not a star that she could see amid the impenetrable blackness. She could not even trace the window by its lighter gloom as she usually did in the darkest nights.

There was silence following the series of groans and she had time to think. She remembered that her door was open into the corridor, and that Miss Roche's door also stood ajar so that should she need anything in the night her call might reach Meg in the next room. Was it possible that the groans proceeded from Miss Roche's room?

She sprang out of bed and felt for the matches and candle which were on a table near her bed. Her hands trembled. She told herself that it was the nervousness of being suddenly awakened from sleep, the chill of the night, which made her teeth chatter. She groped uncertainly, with the result that she knocked down the box of matches. While she felt for it on the floor, the strange, terrible groaning began again.

She said afterwards that if it had not stopped she must have died of the thing. She felt herself drawn from the safe, comfortable feeling of being in the hands of God, of which she had talked to others. She was drawn from that strong stay into a border world of the terror that flies by night.

Her hand felt the matches. Now if she could only

strike one and light the candle ! If her hands would only stop trembling ! If she could lose the horrible feeling of uselessness which lay upon her as though she must sink away and lie a dead heap on the floor ! If she could only have light ! There were things one could not face in the darkness. How still the night was, and how oppressive, although it was very cold !

The first match spurted and went out. While she attempted to strike another the clock in the stableyard began to strike. She listened, with a scared heart. She knew it was going to strike four. It had struck four that other time and that other time, but then it had been in the golden mornings of spring and summer. The sun had held panic at bay. It was very different in the dark of the autumn morning, with all the winter to come and her grief before her and behind her.

As the clock struck the last stroke an unreasoning panic seized her. She could not remain alone, expecting the horrible groans to begin again. She must find human companionship, no matter what happened.

She fled from the room, closing the door behind her. She wanted some strong help and protection. A thought came to her of how Algy Rosse would have soothed a woman's terror. She had seen him one day in a thunderstorm when Eileen Trant had been



frightened and remembered how gently he had soothed her. Any girl might be in love with a golden youth who was capable of such tenderness.

She controlled herself, so as not to enter Miss Roche's room in a way to frighten her ; but despite the strong measure of self-control she put on herself her breath came in sobbing gasps, she was shaking like an aspen. There was a night-light burning in Miss Roche's room. Oh, the blessedness of light ! The little glow from the night-light, filling the room with a soft dim radiance, lifted up her heart.

From hidden things of darkness and the arrow that flieth by night, good Lord deliver us !

She looked back at the door which had closed between her and a nameless terror : then uncertainly at the old-fashioned bed, its curtains of creamy woollen stuff sprinkled with roses. Miss Roche slept well. There was not even a sound of breathing. Should she go back again and face the terror ? Should she keep her experience to herself ? But no—she could not do that. Supposing, supposing, there should really be some one in the tower ! It seemed impossible : but she must share the doubt with some one.

The question was settled for her by Miss Roche ; who lifted herself on an elbow and peered out between the curtains.

“ Is that you, child ? ” she asked. “ Why are

you standing there in your thin nightgown? Is anything the matter?"

"I've been frightened," said Meg, between the chattering of her teeth.

"And you're cold, you creature! Come in here under the blankets and tell me. Are not soft woolly blankets a thing to be grateful for in cold weather? Why, you poor child!"

In the warmth of the blankets Meg presently recovered herself and the chattering of her teeth ceased.

"I am so sorry I awakened you," she said. "Could you go asleep if I was to go back to my own room and leave you in peace?"

"Indeed then, you didn't waken me at all. I was lying awake thinking about you and what a difference you make in this house. Now, tell me what frightened you? Was it that unchancy old tower? The gulls do make queer noises sometimes. You might mistake the noise they make for anything."

"It wasn't gulls," said Meg. "It isn't likely I should be frightened by gulls, having been used to them all my life. What frightened me was the most terrible sound that awoke me from sleep. I am certain it must have come from the tower. It was like some one groaning in terrible pain. I thought at first, when I was only half-awake, that it might have

come from your room, that you might have been dreaming, you poor thing, of the time you were left alone in that great desolate house. It sounded just like that, as of some one deserted and left alone to die."

"Many a one's heard the same sound from that old tower," said Miss Roche. "If I was Erris I'd raze it to the ground. Perhaps some of the ill-luck of the family would go with it."

"You think it was the ghost? Does a ghost groan with that terrible sound of desolation?"

"What could it be but a ghost? How could anything living be in that place? There's no way to reach the Little Beach unless you were a gull; if there's a way into the tower from it as they say there is! The other way must be choked by weeds and thorns long ago—if there is another way. To be sure if the smugglers used it there must have been a way."

"Does no one know about it—if there is a way?"

"I've always heard there was a way. The people wouldn't look for it—not they. It's supposed to run somewhere from Biddy Pendergast's cottage. That would have served the smugglers' purpose very well—if there were smugglers. The cottage is a most unchancy place. All sorts of apparitions are seen there. Now, go asleep. It was the gulls you heard, I daresay."



Her voice trailed off sleepily. A little while and her breathing assured Meg that she was asleep.

Presently Meg's own eyes closed. She had not hoped to sleep ; but she had not been sleeping well of late. When she awoke the early morning light was in the room. She judged that it would be about seven. There was no wind and the intense darkness of the night had given way to a mild grey morning, with a warm glow as of hidden gold in the grey.

She got quietly out of bed without disturbing Miss Roche. She did not want to be found out of her room, to have to explain to Kate the why and wherefore. Servants occasionally left Castle Eagle, because of their own superstitious fears or for some thing that frightened them. She would not be the one to start a scare in the house.

She dressed herself fully and went down through the quiet house. There seemed to be no one about—but she found when she reached the hall door that it was open and Phelim was standing on the steps drawing in long breaths of the morning air.

He greeted her affably, remarking that it was a beautiful morning for a walk ; she answered him and went on. Prince, who wandered at night between her door and Lady Turloughmore's—he certainly had not been at her door when she made her precipitous flight from the room that seemed so safe and harmless by daylight—had overtaken her,



and frolicked sedately in front of and around her, expressing his joy in seeing her and the adventure of an early morning walk.

She had left the house behind her before she made the discovery that Lady Turloughmore's pigeon had somehow left his mistress's safe keeping and was hopping behind her, now and again making short flights. The creature was as fearless as a dog. She bent down and let him hop on to her outstretched palm, then to her shoulder, where he rested very contentedly.

Her walk took her towards the sea and the cliff above the Little Beach. It struck her that there was an unusual clamour of gulls. They were screaming loudly, more loudly than usual, perhaps over a fish of which they were making a greedy meal.

The short grass of the cliff was glistening with one of the heavy autumnal dews under which the whole country was steaming as the sun forced his way through the clouds. The crisp grass, hung with myriads of little snail-shells, crackled under her feet as she went towards the sound of the sea and the clamour of the gulls.

She paused beside the railing which protected the edge of the cliff. Now that the sun had risen the sea showed a surface of pure gold. A soft wind blew in her face. There was something very gentle about the October day.

She could see nothing of the Little Beach, which was half-covered at high tide, but even on this calm day there was a column of spray high in air where the sea broke off the North and the South Wolf: and looking down she could see here and there a jagged tooth of the reef projecting through the water.

She glanced back at the square mass of Castle Eagle, with the squat tower at one corner. What secret did it hide? What was it that moaned within the walls and frightened people out of their senses at night?

Suddenly she uttered a loud cry. Without warning the pigeon had hopped from her shoulder and was over the railings at the edge of the cliff, flashing himself about in the sun's rays, and cooing with what seemed perfect self-satisfaction.

She called to him, kneeling down and stretching an inviting finger through the stout iron railings. They were made impregnable against scaling, which was perhaps as well at this moment, since she would have risked any danger to recover the creature which had brought so much help and comfort to Lady Turloughmore. A vision came to her mind of Lady Turloughmore's face when she should hear that the pigeon was gone. More would go with him than any contrition for her negligence would ever restore.

The gulls screamed below—gulls and puffins and

cormorants. The Little Beach must be a perfect maze of them, the cliff's face populous with their nests.

She called and the pigeon turned his head and made one or two dainty steps towards her. She called again in an agony of hope and fear. He was very wayward, a petted and spoilt creature. Like a spoilt child he ran away from the one who would protect and care for him. He took a few steps towards the edge of the cliff, made a short flight, and to her horror disappeared from sight.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE END OF THE PASSAGE

MEG, wringing her hands in grief and consternation was aware of a new arrival—no other than Johnny Flynn, who stood regarding her out of his reddish brown eyes with much affection.

“ I seen ye crossin’ the grass, Miss, an’ I made bould to come an’ spake to ye. I hope ye’re well, Miss, an’ th’ ould lady doin’ finely. I never got a chance to tell you how *she* kep’ me that night else I’d ha’ carried the message quicker. I’m doin’ fine where I am, Miss.”

There was no need to say it. Decent treatment and happiness and good food had wrought wonders in Johnny Flynn. He had become almost able-bodied. He might be the well-to-do elder brother of the boy who had accosted Meg on Dooras mountain one summer evening, now more than three months ago.

“ Oh, Johnny, I’m in trouble. I don’t know what to do,” said she. “ Lady Turloughmore’s pet pigeon has just gone over the cliff. She will be



distracted when she hears. And it was my fault, entirely my fault. What am I to do at all ? ”

“ Would I be goin’ over the cliff after the ould fowl, Miss ? ” suggested Johnny, politely.

“ Oh, you can’t do that. There’s absolutely no foothold ; and the face of the cliff is dreadfully precipitous. There is no way of getting at the Little Beach. What on earth am I to do, Johnny ? I daren’t tell Lady Turloughmore.”

“ I wouldn’t like to be sayin’ there’d be much left of the ould baste of a bird by now,” said Johnny, consolingly. “ Judgin’ by the noise the gulls do be makin’ below there they’re reefin’ him to tatters. There won’t be a dale to go round.”

Meg stared at him, not knowing what he said. Something had come into her mind, clear-seen and aloof as though she looked at a picture—herself of a summer morning amid the ruins of Biddy Pendergast’s cottage, where not a peasant in the country would venture. She saw the mass of undergrowth growing up against the blackened stones which had once made the wall of a chimney. She felt her foot knock against something—old iron by the feel. Stooping to touch the thing she had found it as she had thought a ring of iron.

“ Johnny,” she said, “ do you know Biddy Pendergast’s cottage ? ”

“ Th’ ould witch’s cottage ? Aye, do I, well.

Many's the time I put the heart across in the other childher be runnin' in an' out of it. They do have great ould superstitions, them country childher."

"Would you be afraid to go there with me?"

"Is it me? What would I be afraid of? I'll just run an' tell me father you want me. Me mother 'll be expectin' me in to breakfast." How proudly Johnny spoke of his father and mother! "I'll just say you want me an' I'll be back in a tick."

Johnny was back "in a tick." His inquisitive eyes were lifted to Meg's face with a look of devotion while she told him the thing she wanted done. It was wild beyond all the probabilities; they were going to look for the passage from Biddy Pendergast's house to the tower. If they found it, it was one chance in a thousand that it would be navigable. If it was, would it land them in the tower? It might come out under the cliffs. If it really ended at the tower, would there be further communication with the Little Beach? it was all doubtful: but—if there was any chance of recovering the pigeon she must take it, if there was but one chance in a hundred thousand.

"What was that you were carrying when you came and spoke to me, Johnny?" she asked. "Was it a spade?"

"It was an ould shovel I was takin' to me, father."

“Go back and fetch it along. It might be useful.”

Johnny obeyed her and brought the spade, carrying it across his shoulder in a workman-like fashion. They skirted the garden-wall of Castle Eagle, dipped into a hollow, crossed a field and were in the field of Biddy Pendergast's house, nearer by this way than Meg had thought possible.

It was about eight o'clock. Smoke had begun to rise from the chimneys of Castle Eagle. It was going to be a beautiful autumn day, the pale bright gold of the air matching the honey-coloured woodlands. The fields were a little desolate, full of the burnt-up herbage and the shabby ragweeds and the wet dying foliage of autumn. The weeds in Biddy Pendergast's cottage were as wet as a river.

To Meg's surprise Johnny Flynn knew all about the secret passage that led from the old ruin. He cleared the weeds and rubbish from the iron ring with his spade. It was set in what had been the hearth of the cottage, but it was not fixed as Meg thought it might have been in a stone too heavy for them to lift. The green, sodden stuff which the spade uncovered, round about the ring, might have been earth or wood or stone. A blow of the spade upon it revealed that it was wood.

It was so set in the earth that it might better have been a part of it for their purpose. The block



of wood resisted all their efforts to raise it : embedded in the solid stone the wood had swelled and hardened. At last Meg agreed to Johnny's suggestion that he should run back and fetch a crowbar.

While she waited, the coldness of the place struck her as a strange thing. The ruins were in the full rays of the mild morning sun ; and yet she shivered. She stepped beyond the cottage ruin and the bare patch to where the cows were grazing in the pasture and was warm again. Prince, who had been whining and bristling while she stayed in the ruin, recovered his lordly placidity and stretched at her feet, where she sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree to wait for Johnny's return, her mind full of trouble for the fate of the lost pigeon.

Johnny came quickly, armed with the crowbar.

" I'm glad ye sat there, Miss, and not in the ould cottage beyant. The cattle'll never graze near it. They say a bird never flies over it. The people were frightened from it I've heard tell by some that got a blast there when they were huntin' about for what they could find ; and were never the better of it afther."

" Country superstitions, Johnny. I thought you were above them."

" What else ? Country people do be terrible foolish. Now, I'm thinkin' we'll soon have it up wid the crow."



They "had it up wid the crow." The square slab of wood lifted slowly, revealing a cavity beneath. No foul vapours came up in their faces as Meg had feared. There was a smell of earth and dampness : nothing more.

A ladder swung by iron hooks over the hollow. Johnny went down it like a monkey, and held it steady below for Meg to descend. Prince, after shivering on the brink for a time, leaped down beside them. The drop after all proved to be only a few feet below the earth.

Before them was a dark passage about six feet in height, roofed and walled and floored, with flags and beams of immense thickness. Some one, whether the smugglers or earlier builders, had built the passage to resist the encroachments of Time. There was damp underfoot, and overhead the walls oozed damp ; but there was no foulness in the atmosphere.

"Bedad," said Johnny, producing a candle and box of matches from his jacket pocket ; "this is a quare place. I'm beginnin' to get at its contrivances. Whosomever planned it, planned it well. Ye know them ould hummocks in the field where the ragweed grows thickest, fairy forts they do be callin' them, an' there isn't man, woman or child 'ud interfere with them, though th' ould ragweed do be sowin' itself all over the place every year till the ground's

poisoned wid it. There's ventilatin' holes under the ragweed, the divil a less. I saw one stickin' its ould snout out and 'twas like an ould drain-pipe. It'll be aisy enough travellin' here, thanks to the man that made it. Weren't they great builders all out ? "

" You're not afraid of the tower, Johnny," Meg said, plunging into the passage where the water dripped from the roof, threatening to extinguish the candle.

" The divil a bit, wid you be my side. There's some say that Conal M'Garvey never died in it at all, that he escaped someway and was seen about the country afther. If this passage was here in his time it was like enough. It 'ud explain some of ould Biddy's quare disappearances too."

He talked of those legendary people as though they had lived and died but yesterday.

The flame of the candle flickered in the draught of the passage and had to be protected by Johnny's hat ; but the air was pure enough for the flame to keep alight in. Now and again they came to a ventilating shaft and saw sky above them through a tangle of weeds. They went carefully, with an expectation that at some point or other the walls of the passage might have fallen in, but though there had been a fall of clay in one or two places the passage was amazingly clear, hardly a passage

perilous at all. Meg began to suspect that others than the smugglers had used the passage at no distant time.

The dog ran on before them in growing excitement and came back now and again to jump on Meg, whining as though he would urge her to further exertions.

“ ’Twould be a quare thing if th’ ould trap was to fall in when our backs was turned,” said Johnny Flynn, “ we’d be like rats in a trap then sure enough.”

As he said it a wind extinguished the candle. They were in darkness: and Meg had a sudden sense of being in the bowels of the earth, imprisoned, as in a grave. For a breathless minute she was panic-stricken. Then, from down the darkness as her eyes grew accustomed to the thick murk, she saw something glimmering like a lighter darkness and the wind blew freshly in her face. There was a sound like surf on a sandy shore, or the wind in a hollow place.

“ I believe I see light, Johnny,” she said. “ There ! Do you see it ? ”

“ The darkness do seem lighter,” Johnny agreed, as he re-lit his candle.

They pushed on. Ever the air came fresher and fresher in their faces. The light in the darkness increased. The dog ran before them in an increasing



excitement, rushing back as though he implored them to hurry.

They were at the end of the passage at last. They stood at the foot of a winding stair. Facing them was another passage down which they could hear the hollow booming of the sea.

"The old tales were true after all, Johnny," Meg said in an awestruck whisper. "There lies the way to the Little Beach, and here are the steps to the tower. Which shall we try first?"

"The dog's on the track o' somethin', Miss," Johnny Flynn said. "Let us try th' ould tower first. We'll see then if there's any truth in them quare stories."

Up they went by a long winding staircase which went round and round by the wall and was lit by narrow arrow slits through which one caught just a glimpse of the country beyond. These were on two sides only; one wall was blank. That must be the wall overlooking the courtyard.

The staircase went round and round till it reached an open door and went on again. The open door led to a room enclosed in the tower, so to speak. There was no light in it. Meg stood at the door and peered inside nervously. She could see that there was something there, boxes, furniture, some sort of square shapes in the dimness.

"The light, Johnny," she said.



There was a deep sigh from the dark place. Her heart leaped in her side and she almost fled, but she stood her ground. Prince uttered a wild yelp and bounded past her into the chamber. The match spurted as it was struck. The candle-flame lit up steadily.

There were a number of cases and bales, packets of various sizes in the place. A heap of ashes lay on a stone hearth. There were various stuffs lying about on top of the boxes. One large box apparently had served some one for a table. There was a sickly air in the place.

What was it which Prince was licking at and whining over with delirious affection? There was something, some one, lying on a bale of stuffs in one corner. Something!

It might have been the apparition of Conal M'Garvey—so lean, so starved was it. A man, his eyes closed; apparently in the stupor of death or dying; a rough, straggling beard; a face in which the cheek bones stood out of the gaunt hollowness. The hand which lay outside the clothes fluttered feebly.

“Glory be to goodness, is it a ghost or a livin' man?” asked Johnny Flynn, peering down at the creature.

Suddenly he caught at Meg's sleeve.

“See you, Miss,” he said, “see you that big cruel

mark on his head. The hair's matted over it in the blood. God help the crathur, who can it be at all. The ould dog seems to know him."

Prince was licking the man's hand in a quiet frenzy of delight.

"Oh, Johnny, could it be—could it be possible," cried Meg, "that it is the Earl come home again after all?"

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE LAST OF THE DOOM

It was indeed the Earl of Turloughmore. The winds and waves had brought him home and flung him up on the Little Beach, broken, and bruised with a terrible gash in his head where he had been dashed against a sharp edge of cliff. He had been left on the Little Beach with injuries enough to kill a man of less robust constitution than he. He had not died. He had come to himself dazed and weak, to find himself imprisoned on the Little Beach with apparently no means of escape from it. The cliff over the Little Beach was tunnelled with caves and winding passages, leading to rock chambers which had been hollowed out, none knew when or by whom. These had served as store-houses for the smugglers. At some time or other—perhaps when a whole gang of smugglers had been captured by the press-gang and carried off to the wars in Flanders, only to be sunk in the Zuyder Zee, the secret of the communication had been lost. The rock chambers and the tower contained wine and tobacco and precious

silks and laces, bales of fine cloth, all manner of things.

By one of the passages Lord Turloughmore had found the communication with the tower, and there he had established himself and dwelt all those months during which he had been mourned as dead. He had attempted no communication with the outer world, but in the twilight which had fallen upon him since his shipwreck he had lived as a savage man, feeding himself upon the eggs of the sea-birds and the flesh of those he could surprise in their nesting places and kill. He had found water at the base of the cliff where a pure stream ran. He had made fire with a flint and rotten wood like a primitive man. He managed to open the cases the smugglers had left so as to provide himself with wine to drink and woollen stuff to make his bed and clothing. There he had lived and slept, the arrowslit above his head, communicating with Meg's room, barely two feet away from her as she lay in bed, although the chintz stretched over it had concealed its presence.

Meg watched by him whilst Johnny Flynn went for assistance. The servants had to be taken into counsel. They were afraid to let Lady Turloughmore know the news too suddenly. Fortunately she did not rise early of mornings and was still in her room. Very tenderly the poor emaciated body was conveyed to the Castle, and, after being washed and



tended, was laid between fine linen sheets, in warm woollen blankets. While a messenger was despatched for a doctor, Phelim, who knew all a gentleman's servant is required to know, shaved his master and cut the long straggling hair, revealing the scar of the wound.

It was wonderful the change brought about in Lord Turloughmore's appearance by these simple things. As he lay in bed, his eyes, wide-open now, roamed about him with a look in them which said that he was picking up the threads of his old life.

The doctor came presently and examined him, keeping a grave face as he did so. Meg met him as he left the room.

"Well?" she said. She and Dr. Doherty were good friends by this time.

"Well?" he repeated: and he wore an air quite unlike his old cheerfulness. "It's a wonderful story, Miss Hildebrand, but it would be a thousand pities if we've found him only to lose him again? I fear that patching up even will hardly be possible. Poor Lady Turloughmore! I wonder if it will comfort her at all that at last an Earl of Turloughmore will die in his bed?"

"You think he will not live?"

"I think the casting-away and the exposure have been too much for him. I should not weep, Miss Hildebrand. That wound in the head was in a

very nasty place. I doubt that, if he could live, he would ever be like other people. Who is to tell her Ladyship ? ”

The telling was taken out of their hands. While they stood talking they had not noticed that Lady Turloughmore had approached at the other end of the corridor. She came towards them quickly, her fair face pale and disturbed.

“ Oh, is it you, doctor ? ” she asked. “ How fortunate it is you ! I am so glad you are here. Julia has fainted. I was going to send for you. I have been up with her a great part of the night and had only just fallen into a sound sleep when I heard her call. I couldn’t really have heard her—but her cry rang through my sleep : and Kate, who has been sitting in her room says that she called me just as I heard her—a whole corridor away, with a loud ringing call. She has delusions, you know, doctor. Her last one was happy for her, for she thought the Earl had come home.”

They were in Julia’s room by this time. All the sewing materials which had been used to litter the place were put away tidily. Amid the nursery things, the dolls’ house, the rocking-horse, the high chair, the bed with the little shrunken old woman in it seemed strangely discordant and out of place.

The doctor stooped ; peered in Julia’s face : felt for pulsation : lifted an eyelid.

“ I’m glad her last thought was a happy one, Lady Turloughmore,” he said. “ She’s gone, the poor old creature ! ”

Lady Turloughmore uttered a low cry. “ I have sorrow upon sorrow,” she said, and turning, she hid her face.

Miss Roche had come in, using the crutches which she always used now.

“ Come out into the sun, Shelagh,” she said. “ Julia is in the sun, after her long desolation. Why, she’s smiling, the creature ! ”

“ Because she thought my husband had come back.”

She allowed Miss Roche to lead her from the room into the long corridor, which was now filled with sun. It was as warm as a May day.

“ Tell her,” whispered the doctor to Meg. “ Tell her—the joy and the grief. Poor soul, I wish we could keep him for her.”

Meg followed Lady Turloughmore and Miss Roche. They were standing in a deep window-seat talking in low tones. Lady Turloughmore was weeping.

“ She did not recognise me at first,” she said, “ and she went babbling on about old things when Hugo was a little boy : and about Ulick and Cicely. But she seemed to recognise me suddenly, for she put out her hand and closed it over mine. ‘ Mistress,

dear,' she said, in a loud voice, ' Wasn't it a mercy you didn't put on the black? White would be more your wear an' his Lordship come home again.' Her eyes really looked as though she saw Heaven opened."

Meg had come up close beside her.

" Dear Lady Turloughmore," she said, " supposing her vision were true, yet that one dare not rejoice entirely? "

Her voice broke but she managed to struggle along bravely.

" Supposing Lord Turloughmore had come home ! Supposing he is very ill—— "

" Where is he? " The wife's voice rang out, startling those who heard. " You would not dare deceive me ! Where is he? "

" Come, you shall see him, he is very ill. Perhaps he will hardly recognise you."

Side by side they went along the corridor to the sick-room. Lady Turloughmore wore a look of dazed, incredulous joy. She stumbled as she walked, almost as though she were blind, and Meg put an arm about her to steady her. She led her into the room. Lady Turloughmore broke from her as she saw the face on the pillow.

" Hugo ! Oh, thank God ! " she cried.

Meg signed to the maid who was keeping watch by the bedside to leave them together. As she



turned away she heard Lord Turloughmore's voice, weary, as with an immense fatigue.

"Shelagh! It is good to be at home. Come closer, Shelagh. Let me see your face."

Glancing back she saw that Lady Turloughmore had laid her head on the pillow by her husband's head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lord Turloughmore lingered for several months, had a much longer day than the doctor promised at first, lived to see some happy things before he died in his bed as no Earl of Turloughmore had died for centuries.

Long before that time Lord Erris had come home, released from the plaster of Paris and able to walk like other people, although still for a considerable time to come he must be much more careful than other people.

Meg had made an attempt to break away before his return, but it was unsuccessful. Lady Turloughmore had seemed so amazed, so horrified, at the suggestion that now Castle Eagle could dispense with her presence and that her father needed her at home.

"We cannot do without you at Castle Eagle," Lady Turloughmore had said indignantly—"after all you have done for us. Some day, of course, you will marry, but till that day comes we cannot do without you."

The utmost concession Meg could wring from Lady Turloughmore was an unwilling consent to her going home to see her father. She left on the very eve of the day that was to see Lord Erris's return home. She bade a lingering farewell to Castle Eagle, to its inhabitants, the animals, the dead inanimate objects. As she stooped to kiss Prince's silky head, the tears overflowed her eyes, and she had to run away lest Lady Turloughmore should detect them and guess that she did not intend to return. It would be so much easier to write, when she was out of reach, going into exile again ; for it would be exile more than ever now, although the Archduchess Magda was kind.

Terence Hildebrand, welcoming Meg with open arms, forbore to say what he thought to her.

"Least said is soonest mended," he said to the sister who was like himself and shared most of his thoughts, "and a little girl's secrets are her own : but I have not got back my own Meg, whatever's happened to her."

He was angry and dismayed when he heard that Meg was returning to Budapest ; but there was something in Meg's eyes that pulled him up short in the midst of his stormy protestations.

"God help her," he said to Mrs. Carew, "she's got to get well in her own way. Perhaps she feels she must get away out of it altogether. Why

couldn't she have stayed at home? Home is best for a girl."

"Let her be," his sister counselled. "She will work out her salvation in her own way. None of us could do it for her, or for any of them, although our hearts may bleed to help them."

After that Terence Hildebrand was exquisitely kind to his girl, with a soft, slow-moving tenderness, as though she were very ill, which would have made Meg laugh, if it had not made her weep passionately.

The time came round to the last day at home. Meg's letter to Lady Turloughmore had been written and despatched. Her trunk was packed—waiting for the very last belongings to go into it before being locked. It was very sad to go, heart-breakingly sad. Life stretched very desolate, an arid expanse, dewless, unwatered, before the girl's vision. She was going to be horribly home-sick. If only she might have stayed at home! But perhaps the home-sickness would help to keep the other trouble out of sight.

She would not look the other trouble in the face. She had escaped from them all, for a little while, to gain courage on that last evening, out to the bridge over the river which ran through the woods. It was the early twilight of the short winter day. Still a few gold leaves tinkled on the branches. The sky had a haze of red and yellow. There was going to



be frost. A little sickle of a moon shone through the bare trees.

She rested her elbows on the parapet of the bridge and hid her face in her hands. She felt an overwhelming sense of wretchedness, of desolation. How sickly the late autumn was! There was a sickly hue over life, the world. To-morrow, by this time she would have covered the first stage of her journey.

Some one came gently over the lightly frosted leaves. A hand was laid on her down-bent head. The tears had come now in a flood, a torrent. She struggled with her sobs, trying to keep them back, as she turned her streaming eyes away. She had no other thought than that her father had surprised her, given up to grief.

“I—I——” she began.

“I’ve come to take you back,” said a voice she had not expected to hear—perhaps never again in this world, certainly not for years.

“Did you suppose we should let you go, Meg? After all you have done for us! Your father sent me to find you. He has offered me a lodging for the night—most kindly. To-morrow I shall take you back. We can telegraph to the Archduchess.”

He put his hand under her chin and lifted it. Was this Lord Erris, this straight upstanding masterful person, young at last? He laid her cheek against his shoulder, stroking the other cheek softly



with his hand. The peaty smell of the home-spun of his coat was in her nostrils, intoxicating, bewildering. He laid a rough masculine cheek against her cheek. How good the roughness was !

“ Have you considered, Meg,” he asked, “ that I have come back a wonderful example of Kellner’s skill ? And that my father is slipping out of life gently, in his bed. There is no more doom for the Earls of Turloughmore. When a Hildebrand crossed our threshold the doom was lifted. The blood of the Hildebrands will bring the blessing to our children’s children. Now, you will come back ? ”

“ But you love Miss Trant,” she said, holding back her lips from his kisses. “ Every one tells me you love Miss Trant. Lady Turloughmore—— ”

“ My mother knows better now. I was in love with Eileen once—calf-love. I am very much obliged to her that she would not look at me. She is a dear creature, but she isn’t Meg. Nothing would satisfy me but Meg, since I have known Meg. I am young enough yet to begin life over again with Meg by my side.”

“ You are sure ? ” she asked with a long sigh of delight.

“ Quite sure. If I were not I should be desolate, for I believe Eileen has chosen or will choose that ornament of the diplomatic service, Mr. Algernon Rosse. Poor Algy ! I used to have a grudge

against him because he was not maimed like me. I am maimed no longer. I grudge him nothing but Meg now. He is a dear fellow. We shall make it easy for him and Eileen. Now—shall we telegraph to the Archduchess ? ”

Meg laughed through her tears. It was so heavenly not to be going after all.

“ They will faint at the post-office at the idea of a telegram to Budapest. They will never understand how to send it.”

“ Then we can wait till we get to Dublin tomorrow. Let us go and tell your father. He will be so glad. He has been in trouble about you.”

“ After all the foxes did not come for a death,” said Meg, as they walked hand in hand. “ Did you know I saw the foxes the first night I was at Castle Eagle ? ”

“ They came for life,” he said. “ I have never believed in the omen of the foxes. They came for life, for luck : for a sign that henceforth all good things should come to the House of the Foxes.”

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